

**Comparing Serious or Persistent Absence from School in England and the  
Netherlands:  
An Exploration of the Influence of Vulnerability and Offending Behaviour**

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## Abstract

This comparative project aims to discover differences and similarities between England and the Netherlands in the characteristics of serious or persistent absentees, and to investigate the influence of the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour. Furthermore, it compares the response of the local authority to serious or persistent absence from school in both countries. Whereas the focus of the response is solely on the parents in England, the emphasis of the response in the Netherlands lies on the serious or persistent absentees themselves. This project takes a broad approach, exploring the overall response to serious or persistent absence from school in each of the countries. In doing so, the project treats serious or persistent absence from school as a complex and wicked problem.

The level of vulnerability and offending behaviour impacts on the characteristics of serious or persistent absentees. This project identifies four groups of absentees in each of the countries: The *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group, the *primarily offending* group, the *primarily vulnerable* group and the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* group. Whilst in England the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group experiences the fewest problems, in the Netherlands this was the *primarily offending* group. Within the whole sample, English absentees are more likely to use drugs, have mental health problems and experience more problems within their family compared to the Dutch absentees. In the Netherlands, on the other hand, case files more often mention sleep issues and communication problems between parents and schools.

In both countries, not many serious or persistent absentees improved their attendance, obtained a qualification or found employment after the response to their absence from school. Although the results in the Netherlands were better than in England for improving attendance and having employment, this project demonstrates that both responses focusing on the parents (in England) and on the young person (in the Netherlands) are not very successful. In fact, it argues that the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour of the absentee is a much better indicator for the likelihood of positive outcomes than the type of response a local authority employs to the serious or persistent absentee and/or the parents.

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## **Declaration**

‘Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.’

Word Count: 95.587

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## Abbreviations

ADHD:	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
AMK:	Advies Meldpunt Kindermishandeling (Advice contact point child abuse).
ASSETS:	This is how the reports of the assessments conducted by the English professionals with young offenders are called
BJZ:	Bureau Jeugdzorg (Bureau Youth Care)
CBS:	Centraal Bureau voor Statistiek (Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics)
C&C:	Care and Custody
CD:	Conduct disorder
DFE:	Department for Education (in England)
ESO:	Education Supervision Order
EWS:	Education Welfare Service
GCSE:	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HALT:	The Alternative (The alternative)
HAVO:	Hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs (Senior general secondary education)
LS:	Legal Services
MBO:	Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs (Vocational education)
MST:	Multisystemic Therapy
MUHP:	Machtiging uithuisplaatsing (authorisation of moving the child out of the family home)
NEET:	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NVQ:	National Vocational Qualification
ODD:	Oppositional defiant disorder
OECD:	The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
OTS:	Ondertoezichtstelling (placement under supervision of the state)
PDDNOS:	Pervasive Development Disorder Not Otherwise Specified

PISA:	Programme for International Student Assessment
PRU:	Pupil Referral Unit
RVDK:	Raad voor de Kinderbescherming (Child Protection Service)
SAP:	School Attendance Panel
SAT:	School Attendance Team (of the Portsmouth city council)
SEN:	Special Educational Needs
UK:	United Kingdom
VMBO:	Vorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs (Pre-vocational secondary education)
VOTS:	Voorlopige ondertoezichstelling (Provisional placement under supervision of the state)
VWO:	Vorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs (Pre-university secondary education)
WHO:	World Health Organisation
YOT:	Youth Offending Team
ZAT:	Zorgadviesteam (Care advisory team)

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## Dissemination of Research

### Publications

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Background

With the introduction of compulsory schooling, the concept of absence from school, often referred to as 'non-attendance', arose. As Carlen, Gleeson and Wardhaugh (1992, p. 12) point out:

*'Compulsory education and school non-attendance constitute two faces of the same coin: it would be inconceivable to imagine otherwise where education for all is required by law'*

The focus of this research was on those children whose absence from school is seen as a serious problem by schools, local authorities and the government: the serious or persistent absentees. Some of these young people are absent because they are (fixed term or permanently) excluded from school (although both in England and the Netherlands excluded children are not considered as absentees in the official absence figures), others are caring for a parent, siblings or their own child and some are working illegally, sitting at home, or are hanging around with friends. What they all have in common, however, is that their serious absence from school is highly likely to impact upon their lives and future chances and therefore raises concerns at school and sometimes in the community. In the short term, serious or persistent absence could lead to social exclusion, health-related problems, drug abuse, poor academic achievement and school dropout (Attwood & Croll, 2015; Cabus & De Witte, 2015a; Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Kearny, 2008a; King & Bernstein, 2001; Lyon & Cotler, 2007; Rodriquez & Conchas, 2009; Spencer, 2009). In the long term, (former) serious or persistent absentees suffer from different economic (unemployment for example), psychological, social and marital problems (Attwood & Croll, 2015; Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Kearny, 2008a; Rocque, Jennings, Piquero, Ozkan & Farrington, 2017).

Furthermore, research has already established that there is a strong link between absenteeism and juvenile offending behaviour (Dembo et al., 2012; Donoghue, 2011; Hayden, 2007). For example, Hayden (2007) found that over 70 per cent of persistent young offenders in her study had a history of absence from school. It is not clear, however, whether or not a causal relationship exists between persistent or serious absence from school and offending behaviour, and if so in which direction. That is to say, it is perfectly possible that the link between persistent or serious absence from school and offending behaviour can be explained by the commonality of the factors that underlie both serious absence from school and juvenile offending behaviour (Weerman & Van der Laan, 2006). This research, therefore, further investigated the complex



circumstances that underlie and surround the issue of serious or persistent absence from school and the connection with offending behaviour.

On the other hand, persistent absentees are often vulnerable children, who are experiencing difficulties on different levels. The vulnerability concept is used in a variety of disciplines and is often mentioned in conjunction with the terms 'risk' and 'resilience'. According to Place, Reynolds, Cousins and O'Neill (2002, p. 162), 'risk factors can stem from multiple stressful life events, one single traumatic event or an accumulation of stress from various personal and environmental sources'. It is an accumulation of different risk factors that makes children vulnerable to diverse adverse outcomes, one of which is persistent or serious absence from school. But as described above, the serious or persistent absence from school is also linked to various adverse outcomes, both in the short and long term, and is therefore also a risk factor in itself. Most persistent absentees are experiencing an accumulation of risk factors at different levels in their environment and at the personal level (Van der Laan, Van der Schans, Boagaerts, 2009). This means that most serious absentees can be seen as very vulnerable children.

This research focused on establishing differences and similarities between serious or persistent absentees in England and the Netherlands and discovering the possible transferability of the different responses of both countries to serious or persistent absentees and/or their parents. This short introduction, however, already shows that serious or persistent absence from school is closely linked to both offending behaviour and vulnerability. Although not all serious or persistent absentees are also juvenile offenders, there is a large overlap between absence from school and offending behaviour. Robertson and Walker (2018) indicate that youth who have been chronically absent from school are 3.5 times more likely to have involvements with the criminal justice system compared to youth who have not been chronically absent from school. Furthermore, the large amount of risk factors many serious or persistent absentees are experiencing suggests that almost all of them are vulnerable to a certain extent (Van der Laan et al., 2009). So, both offending behaviour and vulnerability is common among serious or persistent absentees, but absentees do differ in the level of both offending behaviour and vulnerability. Therefore, this research tried to explore the influence of the level of offending behaviour and vulnerability on the characteristics and outcomes of serious or persistent absentees.

## **1.2 Definitions**

The focus of this research project will be on serious or persistent absence from school. Yet, in research literature and government reports a variety of terms and definitions is used to define concepts related to school absenteeism. Sometimes articles or reports do actually refer to

persistent or serious absence from school but are using other terms and definitions to do so. In this section the most common terms and definitions related to persistent or serious absence from school will be discussed.

School non-attendance refers to all forms of absence from school; that is when a child is supposed to attend school does not, it is called school non-attendance. Within this overarching term different categories of non-attendance are distinguished. The English Department for Education (DFE) (2012) uses adult permission as a key element to differentiate between forms of absence:

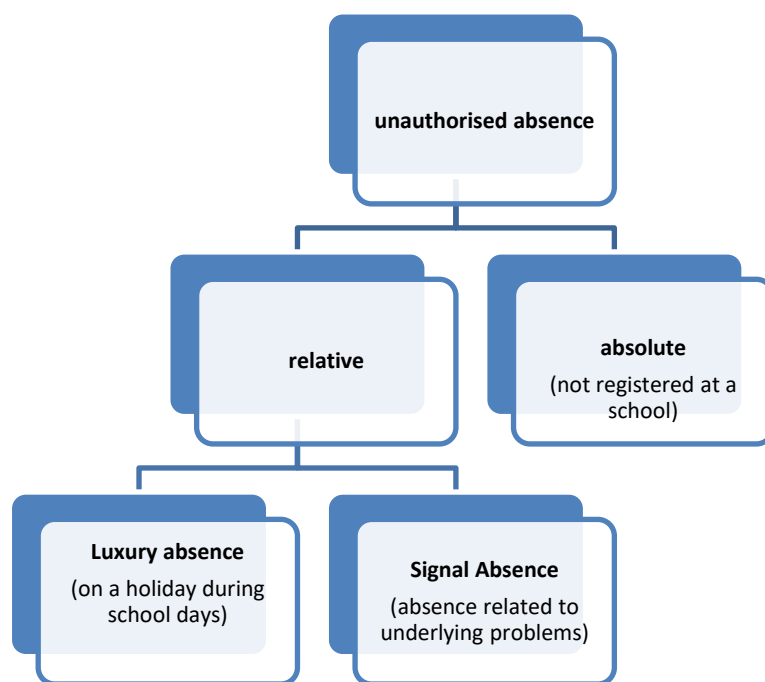
*'Authorised absence is absence with permission from a teacher or other authorised representative of the school. This includes instances of absences for which a satisfactory explanation has been provided (for example, illness)' (DFE, 2012, p. 7).*

*'Unauthorised absence is absence without permission from a teacher or other authorised representative of the school. This includes all unexplained or unjustified absences' (DFE, 2012, p.7).*

The DFE (2012) further mentions that arriving late will also be counted as unauthorised absence. However, as Wilson et al. (2008) point out these definitions are difficult for head teachers, because they have to distinguish between children who are absent without knowledge of their parents and children who are not ill but are absent with parental permission. The DFE (2017) provides a definition for persistent absence from school; starting from the academic year 2015/2016 a child with an overall absence rate – both unauthorised and authorised absences included - higher than 10 percent is seen as a persistent absentee. This used to be 20 percent or higher, but then the DFE (2012) believed a new definition did more justice to the reality in schools and made it 15 percent. So the English Department for Education has been lowering the threshold for persistent absence in recent years.

In the Netherlands there is no explicit definition for persistent absence from school. When calculating the absence level of a child, only unauthorised absences are taken into account in the Netherlands. This probably is the biggest difference in the registration of absence levels between England and the Netherlands. Although, different terms and definitions are used throughout. Figure 1 gives an overview of the terms that are used in the Netherlands. Unauthorised absence is divided into relative absences where a child who is registered at a school is missing lessons or whole days unauthorised, and absolute absence where a child is not registered at a school at all. There are two types of relative absence: luxury absence and signal absence. When a child goes on a holiday during

term time it is called luxury absence in the Netherlands. The term signal absence refers to the signal the young person sends out by not attending school. In this case, the serious or persistent absence from school is viewed as a sign that there are underlying problems in different areas of the child's life.



**Figure 1: Terms used to define different types of unauthorised absence in the Netherlands**

Academics conducting research into absence from school have also come up with a variety of terms to refer to specific forms of problematic school non-attendance. One of the terms that is most commonly used by researchers is *truancy*. However, much debate exists about the definition of *truancy*. Galloway (1985) argues how the different definitions of *truancy* used by authors present difficulties in comparing groups of truants. Whereas some authors describe *truancy* as all forms of absence, regardless of the reason for the absence, others see only wilfully missing school by a child without the consent of the parents as *truancy* (Galloway, 1985). Wilson et al. (2008) already indicated that there still was not one single definition of *truancy* in 2008, and at the time of writing there still was no consensus about the definition of *truancy* among academics. However, the mainstream definition of *truancy* in academic research is that it is a child who chooses not to attend school, with the decision being in control of the child (Atkinson et al., 2000). As Attwood and Croll (2006) point out, there are two different types of truancy. Children who are not attending school for whole days are called *blanket truants*. *Post-registration truancy* refers to children who do attend school but miss particular lessons. This form of *truancy* is harder to monitor and might be

underreported in attendance data. Furthermore, it needs to be mentioned that in the United States *truancy* also is a legal term; in this context *truancy* refers to illegal unexcused absence from school (Kearny, 2008b).

*School phobia, separation anxiety, school refusal* and *school refusal behaviour* are various other terms used by academics to describe problematic school absenteeism (Kearny, 2008b). These terms are mainly used when the absence from school is anxiety-based. For example, children who are afraid to go to school, are depressed, have separation anxiety disorder or are victims of abuse (Atkinson et al., 2000). Children who display *school refusal behaviour* are on average younger than *truants* and emotional problems play a major role in this type of absence from school. The primary focus of this thesis will not be on these anxiety-based types of absence from school.

Carroll (2015) points out that both the terms *truancy* and *school refusal* have specific meanings in relation to the motivation for the absence from school. Since neither truants nor school refusers form a homogenous group, however, it is better to use a more neutral term that covers different types of absence from school (Carroll, 2015). For that reason, *serious* or *persistent absence from school* are the terms that will be used in this research. These terms do justice to the type of absentees that are both in the English and in the Dutch sample, and clearly indicate the target group of the research. This project is not about young people who occasionally skip an hour of school, but about those young people whose attendance problems are severe and might lead to the range of adverse outcomes that were described above. The term *serious or persistent absence from school*, therefore, specifies the severity of the absence from school targeted in this research, but leaves room for different types of absence (i.e. both students who arrive late at school every day and students who miss whole days or weeks are part of the sample). Occasionally other terms will be used in this thesis, when the research (or other evidence) that is being discussed relates to absence from school that is not serious or persistent, or has a very specific connotation or explanation.

### **1.3 Different types of absence from school**

As mentioned above, serious or persistent absentees all have in common that they miss a substantial amount of classes/lessons they were supposed to attend. The exact type of absence from school, however, is different for distinct serious or persistent absentees. Many serious or persistent absentees combine different types of absence, or start with one type of absence but soon also miss other lessons. Because, as Lyon and Cotler (2007) point out, the development of serious or persistent absence from school is progressive in nature, which means that it often starts by just skipping the occasional lesson, but soon progresses to missing whole days or weeks, and becoming serious or persistent. The absence from school gets more and more serious the longer it continues (Lyon & Cotler, 2007).

For some students, getting out of bed early and arriving at school on time is a real struggle, which leads to them often being late and missing the first hour(s) of the school day. Some students start with skipping some non-specific lessons; often at the end of the school day when they decide they would rather go and do something fun outside school. On the other hand, some students are skipping very specific classes, because they do not enjoy that class, are not good at the subject or to avoid a certain teacher. Sälzer and Heine (2016) point out that skipping specific classes on purpose is related to a worse score on that subject on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) performance tests, especially for mathematics and science. Those students who skip specific classes might sometimes even be in school but not attending the class they are supposed to attend. Being in school but not attending classes is called *in-school truancy*, and according to Shute & Cooper (2015) this type of absence presents schools with an even bigger challenge than other types of absence from school. Some students end up not attending school for whole days, weeks or even months or years. In some cases the young person chooses themselves to not attend anymore, but some pupils are frequently fixed-term or permanently excluded from school, which also lead to them missing a substantial amount of school hours. McCluskey, Riddell, Weedon and Fordyce (2016) indicate that there is a big variety between local authorities in the quality and quantity of the educational provision for excluded children. Children from local authorities with poor quality and quantity of educational provision for excluded children might find it more difficult to reintegrate back into (mainstream) education. McCluskey, Riddell and Weedon (2015) point out that reintegration rates achieved by alternative education provisions for excluded children are indeed low. One of the reasons for these low reintegration rates might be that it is often difficult to find a suitable mainstream school for excluded students that is willing to enroll them after being permanently excluded from another school (Hallam et al., 2007). The lack of suitable alternative education provision (in some cases), the temporary characteristic of some alternative provisions and the low reintegration rates lead to some students not attending school at all anymore for long periods of time.

#### **1.4 Responding to serious or persistent absence from school**

Governments around the world are trying to reduce serious or persistent absence from school. This is because absence from school has an enormous economic and social cost throughout the life of a young person (Reid, 2015). Therefore, reducing serious or persistent from school is crucial not only for the individual absentee but also for society (Hallam et al., 2007). However, as Carroll (2015) suggests each form of absence from school relates to a heterogeneous group of absentees, which means it is very hard to find an effective single response to serious or persistent absence from school. Reid (2015) corroborates this by indicating that research evidence shows that it is very

difficult to reduce non-attendance, and that there are not many intervention strategies which are proved to be effective.

#### **1.4.1 Coping, taming or solving**

It can be argued that the complex nature of serious or persistent absence from school, as with other social policy issues that have been referred to as wicked problems, means that there is no easy way of defining or responding to the problem. Rittel and Webber (1973) established some key characteristics of what they called wicked problems compared to tame problems. So-called wicked problems are difficult to define, it is unclear when they are finished, solutions are not true or false but good or bad, and they are all unique, which means there is no one-size fits all approach to a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). All these characteristics can be applied to serious or persistent absence from school. The above sections about the different types of and defining serious or persistent absence from school indicate that it is indeed a problem that is very hard to define and which can manifest itself in different ways. Moreover, the reasons for the onset and progression of the absence from school are very diverse, which suggests that each case needs a unique response. Therefore, serious absence or persistent absence from school will be viewed as a wicked problem in this thesis.

Another feature of wicked problems is that they are never solved (Rittel & Webber, 1973). When it seems impossible to solve the problem completely, politicians and policy makers might have to change their aspirations in responding to serious or persistent absence from school. Daviter (2017) indicates in this respect that there are three possible ways of addressing wicked problems: solving, taming and coping. Policies aiming to solve the wicked problem are often holistic and try to establish cooperation of lots of organisations and stakeholders to resolve the issue. Solving strategies are, therefore, based on the belief that the problem can be solved. When the goal is to tame the problem, the focus is on reducing and controlling it. Daviter (2017, p.8) indicates that 'taming wicked problems (...) typically means that problems are defined and processed so as to align them with some pre-existing organisational or epistemological structure, rather than based on an independent process of policy enquiry'. So the problem needs to be framed in a way that existing organisations or policy makers can deal with the problem. This means that in the case of serious or persistent absence from school, rather than trying to establish cooperation between lots of organisations, the aim should be to decide which organisation is best placed to respond to the serious or persistent absentee. So, rather than the school cooperating with the council, child protection service, court etcetera to find an effective response, in each case one of these organisations should be appointed to address the problem. Therefore, the taming strategy takes away the complexity of the wicked problem by treating it as a 'tame problem' to which one existing

organisation can respond. This means that the problem will not be solved completely, but the organisation responding to the serious or persistent absentee can focus on the most problematic area and thereby address that selected aspect of the problem.

The coping strategy uses more fragmented and disjointed policy responses which mirror the complex and ambiguous nature of wicked problems. So, within the coping strategy policy responsibility can be divided between different organisations, even if parts of the problem seem to be interdependent (Daviter, 2017). Daviter (2017, p. 10) points out that: 'In contrast to the holistic view of problem governance, this strategy [the coping strategy] is informed by the view that organisational differentiation and the fragmentation of administrative tasks and structures are necessary buffers against the unmitigated onslaught of complexity that would otherwise hopelessly overwhelm any purposeful attempt at addressing wicked problems'. Moreover, 'the impossibility to resolve a policy problem comprehensively and definitively is taken for granted as is the resulting need for continuous policy analysis and adaptation' (Daviter, 2017, p. 11). Applying a coping strategy to serious or persistent absence from school, would mean that different organisations (school, council, court, welfare organisations and others) could set out policy responses to deal with serious or persistent absence from school simultaneously without the need for much cooperation between these organisations. Even if part of the serious or persistent absence from school seems to be caused by interdependent factors (for example problems within the family that increase the problems at school), there is no need for cooperation between the response at the school and the family level.

So, the solving strategy endeavours to tackle serious or persistent absence from school completely, whereas the taming and coping strategies do not aim for a complete solution. Daviter (2017) argues that which strategy works best depends on the nature of the wicked problem, and whether the focus is on the analytical or the administrative challenges the problem brings along. A focus on the analytical approach is about analysing all factors that are related to the problem to create a good understanding of the problem as a whole. The administrative focus, on the other hand, is more about how to respond directly to the problem and about how different organisations should cooperate in order to tackle the wicked problem. In practice, policy agendas may not completely fit into one of the three strategies, but some policies might focus more on solving, coping or taming the problem than others. In this thesis, the goal behind different policies and practice in both England and the Netherlands on how to deal with serious or persistent absence from school will be viewed in light of the solving, taming or coping debate.

#### **1.4.2 Legal response in England and the Netherlands**

The Netherlands and England respond differently to serious or persistent absence from school. In

the Netherlands serious absentees (age 12 or older) are prosecuted (Dutch Ministry of Education, 2011a). In addition parents can also be prosecuted when they are deemed responsible for the persistent or serious absence from school. In comparison, in England only parents of persistent or serious absentees can be fined, prosecuted and even imprisoned (Donoghue, 2011). See Figure 2 for an overview of who can be held legally responsible for the persistent/serious absence of a young person over 12 in both countries.

		Netherlands	England
responsibility	parents	<p>sometimes legally responsible</p> <p>fine, warning, very rare: imprisonment</p>	<p>legally responsible</p> <p>fine, parenting order, imprisonment</p>
	young person	<p>legally responsible</p> <p>(conditional) community service, sentence with youth probation</p>	<p>not legally responsible</p> <p>help / support</p>

**Figure 2: The legal responsibility of parents and young people in the case of persistent or serious absence in England and the Netherlands.**

Although the difference in response to persistent or serious absence from school looks to be very clear cut at first sight, when looking further into what actually happens to both students and parents in both countries it is less straightforward. Both countries seem to struggle to find a balance between welfare and justice when responding to serious school absence. Where the approach to the young person in the Netherlands looks very justice based, professionals really try to support the young person with the goal of getting them to attend school again. Many of the serious or persistent absentees are sentenced to a conditional sentence with the special condition to follow the guidance of the youth probation service. The youth probation service tries to set up adequate professional support to remove some of the barriers to attend school the young person is experiencing (more care based). In England, whilst parents can be prosecuted for the persistent absence of their children (which seems very justice based), there is also support from professionals (for example parenting courses) available to improve the family dynamics and reduce the serious or persistent absence from school.



## **1.5 Theoretical framework**

The complex nature of persistent or serious absence from school suggests that there is no easy way of defining or responding to the problem. The theoretical framework of the research, therefore, has to be suitable to conceptualise wicked and complex problems. Using an analytical approach to research serious or persistent absence from school should lead to a complete understanding of the problem (Daviter, 2017). As Conklin (2006) indicates, part of the problem when dealing with wicked problems is that the tools, thinking and methods that are used might be fitting for tame problems but not for the complexity of a wicked problem. This often leads to a wrong or incomplete conceptualisation of the problem, which makes it hard to respond effectively. When governments and policy makers do not acknowledge the complexity of a problem, they tend to focus on achieving short-term goals that are easy to measure. Whereas when the conceptualisation of a problem is right and the complexity accepted, professionals responding to the issue could get more space to focus on improving outcomes in the longer run, which better meet the needs of the individuals involved (Devaney & Spratt, 2009). A good analytical conceptualisation of the problem can also inform professionals and policy makers in the strategy they could best use when responding to the issue: i.e. solving, coping or taming (Daviter, 2017).

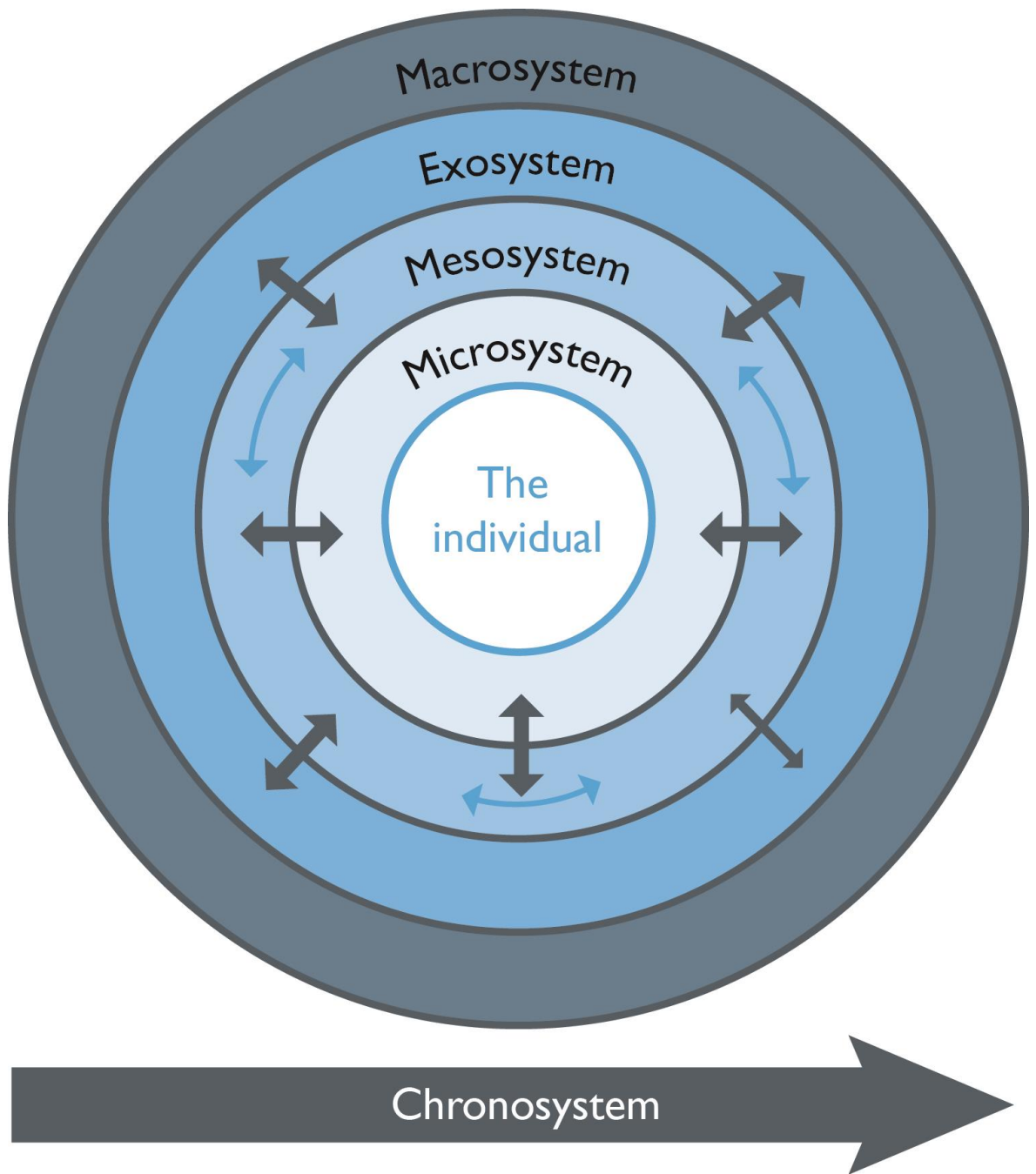
Closely linked to this idea of social phenomena as wicked problems is the use of complexity theory. Complexity theory addresses mainly the non-linearity of social problems. It views social phenomena as complex problems in which different systems and subsystems dynamically interact with each other; a (small) change in one of these systems can change the context for all the other systems (Pycroft & Bartollas, 2014). This means that it is hard to predict the outcome of any intervention, because it is difficult to anticipate how the change in one of the systems will affect the other systems (Fish & Hardy, 2015). The study of complex issues, such as serious or persistent absence from school, requires therefore that the problem is viewed within all the systems around it and that it is acknowledged that these social problems are not easily solved and one-size fits all approaches will not work (Fish & Hardy, 2015). Sugrue, Zuel and Laliberte (2016) corroborate this finding for chronic absence from school: they argue that because chronic school absence is related to a multilevel ecology of factors, an intervention model needs to be equally complex in order to be successful.

So, the theoretical framework has to be flexible and suitable to deal with the wicked and complex problem that serious or persistent absence from school is. Three different theories will be used to interpret serious or persistent absence from school throughout this thesis: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the social cognitive theory of Bandura and Farrington's risk and protective factors paradigm. The next sections will describe these theories in more detail

and point out how these theories complement each other to conceptualise the complex problem of serious or persistent absence from school.

#### **1.5.1 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory**

The ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) will be used to point out different influences on serious or persistent absence from school (See Figure 3). In the ecological systems theory, Bronfenbrenner distinguishes five environmental systems that impact on the development of a young person. The individual is placed in the middle of this model and the distinct systems are placed around the individual. Closest to the individual are the different microsystems in which the individual participates, for example the family, the school, the peer group and a sports club. Mesosystems address the relations between different microsystems in which a young person is involved; e.g. when a student has problems with a teacher in school, this might affect his behaviour at home. Exosystems are social settings in which the individual is not directly involved, but that can still have an impact on the young person. Examples of exosystems are the workplace of the parents and social services. The culture in which the young person grows up is a macrosystem. Finally, the chronosystem relates to the influence of time. Especially the time since a major environmental event or a life transition happened is key for the power of that event on the young person and the different environmental systems.

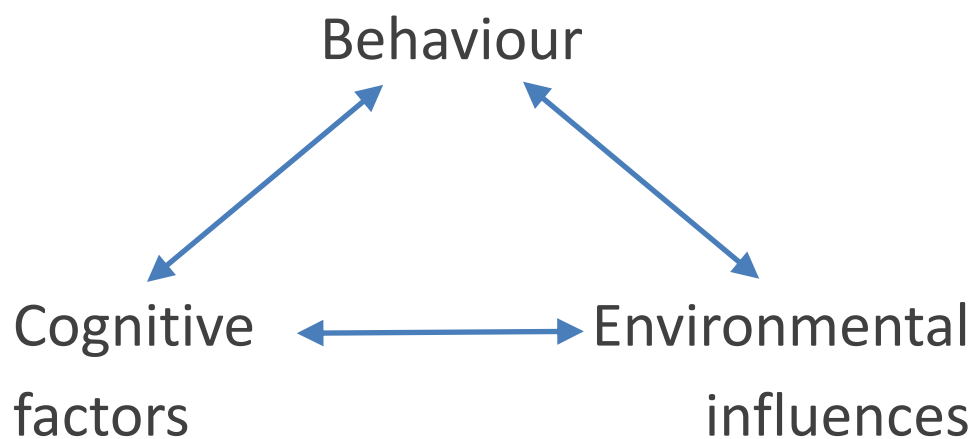


**Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Santrock, 2007)**

The strength of the ecological systems theory is that it not only addresses single factors affecting the development of an individual, but it also acknowledges the connections and links among factors within a single system and between the different systems. The theory, therefore, acknowledges both the complexity and the dynamically changing systems that are important to conceptualise serious or persistent absence from school.

### 1.5.2 Bandura's social cognitive theory

As Bronfenbrenner (1986) points out the processes that influence development in distinct surroundings are not independent of each other and operate in both directions. However, the influence of individuals and their behaviour on the environments around them is emphasised more strongly in the social cognitive theory of Bandura (1977). An important part of Bandura's social cognitive theory is reciprocal determinism, which stresses triadic reciprocity in which personal behaviour, cognitive factors and the environment interact with each other (See Figure 4)(Bandura, 1986).



*Figure 4: The model of reciprocal determinism in the social cognitive theory of Bandura (Santrock, 2007)*

Applying this theory to absenteeism will do justice to the transactional nature of persistent absence from school; the school absence of a child is not only impacted by the contextual factors in all settings, it also affects these contextual factors (Kearny 2008; Lyon & Cotler, 2007). Choosing the combination of the ecological systems theory and the social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework for the analysis and characterisation of serious or persistent absence from school acknowledges that both the individual and the surrounding environmental systems impact on persistent and serious absence from school.

### 1.5.3 Farrington's risk and protective factors paradigm

So, the combination of Bandura's social cognitive theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory indicate that factors at the individual level and within different systems might affect the onset and existence of serious or persistent absence from school. The 'risk and protective factors paradigm' of Farrington (2000) will be used to discuss the role of specific factors within the different systems on serious or persistent absence from school. Farrington (2000) distinguishes between

factors that enhance the chance of a young person displaying criminal behaviour ('risk factors') and factors that might prevent a young person from committing a crime ('protective factors').

Therefore, factors and circumstances that increase the likelihood of an individual displaying a certain behaviour, in this case serious or persistent absence from school, can be seen as 'risk factors' (Farrington, 2000). Factors impacting on certain behaviours often have a bipolar character; they are a continuum, in which the negative end of the continuum forms a 'risk factor' and the positive end of the continuum is a 'protective factor' (Masten, 2001). Consequently, when something is established as a 'risk factor' for absence from school, the opposite often will be a 'protective factor'. The focus in much research studies is often on the well-known 'risk factors', but the 'protective factors' are likely to be just at the opposite end of the continuum of the mentioned 'risk factors'.

The combination of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Bandura's social cognitive theory and Farrington's risk and protective factors paradigm will serve as the theoretical framework for this research project. In Chapter 2, the advantages and disadvantages of this theoretical framework will be discussed, and it will be applied to the research evidence on serious or persistent absence from school, offending behaviour and vulnerability.

## **1.6 Research focus**

The focus of this research was on comparing (the response to) serious or persistent absence from school in England and the Netherlands. In both countries, the government aims to reduce serious or persistent absence from school. The Dutch government states in their coalition agreement that they want to reduce the number of young people 'sitting at home' (meaning not in education) and to signal and deal with absence from school at an earlier stage (VVD, CDA, D66 & Christenunie, 2017). Similarly, the UK government expects schools and local authorities to reduce persistent absence, ensure access to full-time education for every child, and act early to identify absence patterns (DFE, 2018a). In addition, in both countries the age of compulsory education has been raised over the years and a qualification requirement has been linked to the compulsory education age (See Chapter 3 Table 10 for an overview of legislation around the age of compulsory education in both countries). Finally, both the Dutch and the English law allow for punitive measures (fines, imprisoning parents, community service sentences for the absentee etc.) in response to serious or persistent absence from school instead of more welfare-based solutions (i.e. more individual and family support) (See section 1.4.2), although the focus is different in both countries (i.e. England focuses on punishing parents compared to both the young person and/or the parents in the

Netherlands). Yet, this research argues that most serious or persistent absentees are suffering from so many underlying problems (at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory) that both increasing the age of compulsory education and using a more punitive response will in many cases not have a positive effect.

There are three main contributions to knowledge of this research project. Firstly, the comparative angle creates a better understanding of factors at the macrolevel (of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory) that impact on serious or persistent absence from school, because macrolevel factors might explain differences and similarities between the English and Dutch absentees. Secondly, this research has focused on the overall response to serious or persistent absence by the local authority, whereas most research conducted into the response to serious or persistent absence from school has tried to establish the effectiveness of specific intervention programmes implemented in schools or the court (often with an intervention group and a control group). Therefore, this research creates a better understanding of what happens to a young person after the serious or persistent absence from school has been brought to the attention of the local authority in England and the Netherlands. Thirdly, this research specifically addresses the impact of both the level of offending and the level of vulnerability of the serious or persistent absentees on their characteristics and three short-term outcomes (improving attendance, obtaining a qualification and finding employment). To establish these contributions to knowledge, the following aims and objectives were set out:

#### *Overall aims*

**Aim 1:** To investigate serious or persistent absence from school in England and the Netherlands - specifically the characteristics of the serious or persistent absentees, the influence of the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour and the policies and practice in each country.

**Aim 2:** To identify similarities and differences between England and the Netherlands in responding to serious or persistent absence from school and to consider the transferability of responses between the two countries.

#### *Objectives:*

- To create a theoretical framework and research design suitable to investigate the wicked and complex problem of serious or persistent absence from school.
- To review the existing state of knowledge about serious or persistent absence from school in both England and the Netherlands, and to embed this into international research evidence.

- To collect secondary data at the national level for England and the Netherlands and at the local level for Portsmouth and Rotterdam (the cities that will be used as case studies).
- To analyse the background and characteristics of a sample of serious or persistent absentees in both England and the Netherlands, specifically in relation to vulnerability and offending behaviour.
- To better understand and compare the processes that underlie persistent or serious absence from school in England and the Netherlands.
- To explore the different approaches used in policy and in practice to respond to serious or persistent absence from school in England and the Netherlands, taking into account the balance between welfare and punishment in the overall approach in each country.

## **1.7 Organisation of the thesis**

The thesis will be divided into three parts (See Table 1).

**Table 1. *The organisation of the thesis***

<b>Part 1 Setting the framework</b>	<b>Content</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b> Introduction	Introduces the issue and main concepts, and sets out the research aims and objectives.
<b>Chapter 2</b> Literature review	Reviews research evidence on serious or persistent absence from school, vulnerability and offending behaviour.
<b>Chapter 3</b> Comparing England and the Netherlands	Discusses different macrosystems in both countries that might impact indirectly on serious or persistent absence from school.
<b>Chapter 4</b> Research design and Methods	Sets out the overall design and describes the specific research methods used within the research project.
<b>Part 2 Findings from empirical research</b>	
<b>Chapter 5</b> Differences and similarities between serious or persistent absentees	Analyses differences between serious or persistent absentees within and between countries. It compares four different groups of absentees, based on level of vulnerability and offending behaviour.
<b>Chapter 6</b> Comparing case studies of serious or persistent absentees in England and the Netherlands	Gives an in-depth description of the adversities 16 serious or persistent absentees (divided over the countries and the four groups) experience throughout their lives and discusses the outcomes for these young people.
<b>Chapter 7</b> Comparing professional views on serious or persistent absence from school	Compares how professionals in both countries conceptualise serious or persistent absence from school, and what they believe would be an effective way of responding to serious or persistent absentees and/or their parents.
<b>Part 3 Discussion and conclusion</b>	
<b>Chapter 8</b> Discussion & Conclusion	Reviews and answers the aims and objectives of the research, and compares the findings of the current research project with existing research evidence. Discusses limitations and areas for further research.



## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The main topic of this research project is serious or persistent absence from school. Yet, as the main aims that were set out in Chapter 1 indicate, a specific goal of this study is to investigate the impact of the level of (juvenile) offending behaviour and vulnerability on serious or persistent absence from school. This means that in this chapter in addition to the research evidence on serious or persistent absence from school, also criminological literature on the causes and consequences of juvenile offending behaviour and literature on vulnerability will be reviewed. The goal of this literature review is to identify gaps in the literature which can be addressed by this research project.

The literature review will start with a critical examination of the theoretical framework (See section 1.5 of Chapter 1), that will then be applied to serious or persistent absence from school. Secondly, juvenile offending behaviour and the connection between offending behaviour and serious or persistent absence from school will be discussed. Thirdly, the literature review will lead to a definition of vulnerability and research on the relationship between serious or persistent absence from school will and vulnerability will be examined. Fourthly, some education based concepts (school exclusion, disengagement and disaffection, and school bullying) that research has linked to absence from school will be discussed. Finally, research evidence on interventions targeting serious or persistent absence from school will be reviewed. The conclusion of this chapter will then identify some gaps in the available literature and set out how this research project can contribute to fill these gaps.

### **2.2 Applying the theoretical framework to serious or persistent absence from school**

The combination of the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner, the cognitive learning theory of Bandura, and Farrington's risk and protective factors paradigm acknowledges the many factors of influence on the problem and the dynamics between these factors, at the various levels. Furthermore, it not only allows the possibility of identifying which factors at specific levels (individual, microsystem etc.) are related to serious or persistent absence from school, but also pays attention to the interplay between some factors at different levels. These theories, therefore, seem very suitable to come to a full conception of the problem, which will provide a useful guide when debating how best to respond to serious or persistent absence from school.

Yet, especially Farrington's risk and protective factors paradigm has been critiqued a lot in recent years (Haines & Case, 2018). The main criticism is that the use of the risk factors paradigm does not lead to an accurate picture of the causes of youth crime (O'Mahony, 2009). According to O'Mahony (2009, p.113): "The RFPP [Risk Factors Prevention Paradigm] strongly and correctly affirms the role of biological, psychological and social factors in the emergence of criminality, but fails to provide a framework for, on the one hand, the integration of these diverse factors and, on the other, the differentiation of the factors in terms of their centrality and significance". Both in England and the Netherlands, the risk factor paradigm, however, was central in the instrument used for the assessment of the serious or persistent absentees/young offenders (in the samples of this research project). Therefore, the use of Farrington's paradigm is useful in this thesis and adding Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Bandura's social cognitive theory to the theoretical framework takes away some of the criticism. These two theories address the interaction between different factors that impact on the development of a young person, and therefore the interplay and integration of risk factors for serious or persistent absence from school will definitely be taken into account in this research project.

In this section risk factors impacting upon persistent and serious absence from school in each of the environmental systems and at the individual level will be set out to indicate how the framework can be applied to persistent or serious absence from school. The different functions and characteristics of schooling in modern Western societies will be discussed as they are believed to be macrosystems that affect serious absence from school. However, the next chapter (Chapter 3) will describe similarities and differences between England and the Netherlands in how education and care are organised. Chapter 3 will, therefore, address different macrosystems related to serious or persistent absence from school in each of the countries in more detail.

### **2.2.1 Influences on persistent or serious absence per system**

See Table 2 for an overview of the theoretical framework applied to persistent or serious absence from school. The next sections will discuss the different influences per system in more detail. This section will use the theoretical framework (the combination of the ecological systems theory, the social cognitive theory and the risk and protective factors paradigm) to establish some influencing factors at different levels. It will start with the systems most far away from the individual of which the influence on the individual and possible serious or persistent absence from school is more indirect and implicit. It will then move on towards the risk factors for persistent absence on the levels closer to the individual. The accumulation of risk factors that many persistent absentees experience (both within the same ecological system and across the different systems) shows the

vulnerability of many persistent absentees. The closer to the individual a risk factor is placed, the more direct and explicit the risk factors will become.

**Table 2. A combination of the ecological systems theory, the risk and protective factor paradigm and the social cognitive theory applied to serious or persistent absence from school**

Ecological system	Main influences	Impact on absence/ risk factor
<b>Chronosystem</b>	Life transitions	Timing of traumatic events Transitions between schools
<b>Macrosystem</b>	Function of schools Education and inequality	Schools are organised for the 'academic child' Education increases social inequality
<b>Exosystem</b>	SES/employment parents  Social support Welfare services	Unemployment Low SES parents → difficulties with finding appropriate work Lack of social network Too little or too much involvement of professionals
<b>Mesosystem</b>	Link school and family  Link school and peers	Communication between family and school is poor Bullying by peers at school
<b>Microsystem</b>	Family      School   Peers	Single-parent family Conflicts in family (Witness of) domestic violence Poverty and debts Health and substance misuse parents Siblings as bad role models Bad relationship with teachers Difficulties with the level of schoolwork Lack of individual attention Bad behaviour peers (truancy and delinquency) Lack of friendships
<b>Individual</b>	Physical health  Mental health (internalising problems) Behaviour problems (externalising problems)	Chronic illness Asthma Anxiety disorders/Depression Sleep problems Behaviour disorders (ADHD, ADD, CD, ODD) Impulsiveness and aggression

### 2.2.2 Chronosystem

The next sections will show that many of the young people experience risk factors at different levels. Some of these risk factors bring about the development of a trauma, which then in turn

might increase the likelihood of becoming a serious or persistent absentee. McClean, Taylor and O'Donnel (2016) indicate that childhood adversity (especially maltreatment) leads to lower school achievement in the long term. This effect was, however, less strong for children who were taken out of the home into care, whose attendance was generally better. Therefore, regular school attendance was a protective factor for the adverse effect of experiencing maltreatment in childhood. This indicates that although childhood traumas can have a negative impact on future school achievement, there are other factors (such as regular school attendance) which can mitigate these negative effects (McClean et al., 2016). This also shows that although some events might have happened a long time ago, they can still impact on outcomes long after it happened.

The transition from primary to secondary school can be seen as an important point in the school lives of young people. A difficult transition can lead to adverse outcomes for the young person in different areas (Bailey & Baines, 2012; Waters, Lester & Cross, 2014). The transitions can cause negative educational outcomes, but might also lead to social and emotional problems for the young person (Bailey & Baines, 2012). According to Choi (2012) the transition to secondary school for English pupils does not affect their academic achievement directly, yet it does lead to an increase in unauthorised absence in the first half-term of year 7. Therefore, in the short term the negative educational outcomes are mainly in relation to school absence, however in the long run the adverse outcomes in other areas might also impact on the academic achievement of young people. Brewin and Statham (2011) point out that the transition can be extra difficult for looked after children, and therefore these children might need extra support to help them with the transition. In conclusion, the transition from primary to secondary school might impact on persistent absence directly, but can also affect serious absence through the interplay with other factors within different systems that will be discussed later.

### **2.2.3 Macrosystems**

In this section the different functions that schooling has in modern societies will be discussed. Furthermore, it will address the extent to which the nature of the education systems impacts upon equality between different social groups and whether education is really for all. The goals and the nature of education in England and the Netherlands can function as macrosystems in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and may thereby impact upon persistent or serious absence from school. Please find more discussion of macrosystems in Chapter 3.

#### *Functions of education*

Biesta (2009) argues that there are three distinct functions of education: the qualification, socialization and subjectification function. The qualification function of education involves gaining

knowledge and skills and is often related to economic arguments. Leaving school with a qualification increases the chances of an individual on the labour market, which is in the interests of both the individual and society (Goodman & Burton, 2013). This is probably one of the reasons for governments to value good education as important and it explains why education is compulsory. As Biesta (2009) argues, the qualification function is a major function of organised education and provides a rationale for state-funded education. Two of the four pillars for learning – distinguished in the UNESCO Delors report of 1996 – are covered in this qualification function: ‘learning to know’ and ‘learning to do’, these pillars involve acquiring knowledge and skills and gaining the necessary life skills (Power, 2006). Related to the qualification function are the functions of education that are mentioned by Fend (1974) as cited by Bol and Van de Werfhorst (2013) to maximise the capabilities of children and to allocate students to the labour market. The qualification function of education refers to the main traditional educational goal to increase skills and knowledge of pupils.

The socialisation function alludes to the role that education plays in assuring that pupils and young people become part of particular social, cultural and political orders (Biesta, 2009). This socialisation function operates both explicit and implicit; sometimes it is the aim of an educational programme to insert certain values and norms, however, even if it is not the specific aim education still fulfils this socialising function. As Biesta (2009, p. 40) points out:

*'Through its socialising function education inserts individuals into existing ways of doing and being and, through this, plays an important role in the continuation of culture and tradition – both with regard to its desirable and its undesirable aspects.'*

By acknowledging this socialisation function of education, different scientists and policy makers argue that schools should use this function to form young people into ‘good citizens’. Since 2006, Dutch legislation and regulations oblige schools to work on citizenship education to promote active citizenship and social integration (Veugelers, 2007). Therefore, the socialisation function is explicitly used to stimulate social integration and is one of the reasons why the Dutch Government wants all children to attend school. Closely related to this socialisation function is the ‘learning to live together’ pillar, which was introduced in the UNESCO Delors report of 1996 (Power, 2006). To summarise, the (explicit and implicit) socialisation function of education is valued as very important by governments and scientists and creates opportunities for governments to guide young people in a desired direction.

The final function of education distinguished by Biesta (2009) is the subjectification function. He argues that this function is actually the opposite of the socialisation function and is about the individuation of young people. Furthermore, he points out that it is debatable whether

(all) schools actually perform this function. The 'learning to be' pillar in the Unesco Delors reports argues that education can contribute to developing young people's personality and autonomy. Of the three distinguished functions, the subjectification function is the least emphasised by policy makers and governments in modern Western societies as England and the Netherlands.

By discussing three distinct functions of education the image is created that education in England and the Netherlands serves a variety of goals and that its function is broader than only adding skills and knowledge. A logical consequence would be that to judge the effectiveness of education or an individual school, attention will be given to the extent to which education has achieved these three different goals. Or at the least both the qualification and the socialization function would have to be taken into account, because they are valued as the more important functions of education. Yet, the focus of the government and (international) comparisons when measuring the effectiveness of schools or education in a country often lies on the more easy to measure minimal level of performance or the place on a league table (Power, 2006). Unfortunately, according to Gray (2004) schools that turn out to be effective when measuring the academic performance are not necessarily effective in other areas as well. Formby and Wolstenholme (2012) even argue that when schools try to achieve both good attainment and the support of the well-being of pupils, this will lead to conflicting policy agendas. Therefore, the qualification function competes with the other two functions. Because schools are being (almost) solely assessed on academic attainment and performance, without much attention to the performance of a school in the areas of socialization and subjectification, they might prioritise the qualification function over the other two functions.

### *Education and inequality*

Another goal of education is promoting equality of opportunity between children and young people from different social groups (Bol & Van de Werfhorst, 2013). However, whether education really achieves this goal or whether it actually contributes to inequality is still subject to debate. Stevenson (2007) argues that education actually maintains social inequality. On an individual level, the focus on academic performance creates a culture in which social inequality maintains; because an individual without good attainment will automatically have fewer chances on the labour market and later in life (Stevenson, 2007). Furthermore, the nature of the education system (for England and the Netherlands discussed in Chapter 3) undoubtedly plays a part in the extent to which education increases or decreases inequality between young people. A tracked system – like the Dutch system – ensures a better allocation of young people to the labour market, however the downside is that it also leads to an increase in the inequality of educational opportunity (Bol & Van de Werfhorst, 2013). This shows that different goals of education sometimes request conflicting

policies. This means that governments and schools in deciding their policy need to either find a good balance or have to choose between the different goals and functions of education. As Pirrie and Lowden (2004) point out, the politicians who discuss the education system and decide which policies will be implemented are almost always highly educated and have a high social economic status. Therefore, the interests of the socially disadvantaged and the lower educated might be overlooked in the decision making processes.

#### **2.2.4 Exosystems**

Most exosystems of influence on serious or persistent absence from school are closely related to the family of the young person. Consequently, the impact of these factors on serious or persistent absence from school often comes through the change in the family circumstances of the young person created by these factors at the exosystem level. If the impact on the young person is very large, it will be addressed as a factor within the microsystem family, but when there is more of an indirect influence it can be seen as an exosystem. For example, poverty and debts within the family are a microsystem, but the unemployment of parent(s) which is sometimes the cause of the poverty is an exosystem. Unemployment of parents is a predictor of serious or persistent absence from school (Egger et al., 2003; Ingul et al., 2013). Ingul et al. (2013) point out that having parents who are often absent from their work predicts school absenteeism, and they wonder whether being absent from duties is learned behaviour. So, parents who are not setting the example of working might (subconsciously) imply that attending school regularly is not that important, which affects the serious or persistent absence of the young person.

In addition, the amount of social support at hand for the family influences on serious or persistent absence from school (Lyon & Cotler, 2007). Ideally this support comes from a social network surrounding the family, but also the lack of involvement from social and educational support services is a risk factor for serious absence from school (Kearny, 2008b). However, as the UK Department for Communities and Local Government (2012) point out in the support for the start of the 'Troubled Families' programme, having too many different professionals and services involved with one family and individuals in that family can also work negatively as the family might become confused by overlapping assessments and appointments. Therefore, not only a lack of service involvement, but also an overload of too many different services and professionals within a family can have a negative impact on the individuals involved. Furthermore, getting families and the young person to engage with support is a challenge for professionals dealing with serious or persistent absence from school. This is confirmed by Hayden and Jenkins (2015) who indicate that professionals working within the 'Troubled Families' programme believed it is key to address those

issues that families felt were important, because otherwise they will not engage with the support offered.

### **2.2.5 Mesosystems**

Not into all relations between different microsystems and the influence of these on serious absence from school has been much research conducted. Thornton et al. (2013) do suggest that it is likely that distinct factors interact with each other. Extensive research points towards a strong impact of the relations between the school and the home environment on persistent absence from school (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Claes, 2009; Kearny, 2008a; Lauchlan, 2003; Lyon & Cotler, 2007; Thornton et al., 2013). Especially little parental involvement with the school is a risk factor for non-attendance (Sheppard, 2009). With parents monitoring homework as indicator for parental involvement, Attwood and Croll (2006) found an association between parental involvement and truancy, but this was not very strong. Yet, when parents do not regularly monitor homework the risk of truancy increases. Possibly, this association was not very strong, because the quality and quantity of contacts between parents and school are a better predictor of absence from school. As Thornton et al. (2013) point out, parental involvement with school plays a major role, and for immigrant groups this involvement is often lower due to language difficulties. Claes et al. (2009) consider it a task of the school to involve parents with the school process. When there is no good connection and communication between parents and school, the likelihood increases that serious absence from school is noticed very late. Due to the progressive nature of absence from school, this might then lead to greater levels of severity before an intervention can start, which reduces the chance of the intervention being successful (Lyon & Cotler, 2007). Hence, a good relationship between parents and school can both prevent serious absence from school, and if absence from school has already started it might lead to an earlier detection of the problem which opens the possibility of early focused intervention.

### **2.2.6 Microsystems**

#### *The family*

For most absentees the family is an important microsystem that has an influence on their development. A family breakup increases the likelihood that a young person becomes a persistent or serious absentee (Veenstra et al., 2010). The majority of persistent absentees whose parents are separated are not in touch anymore with one of their biological parents (Van Veldhuizen, 2010). Furthermore, parental conflict within the family has a negative influence on children and impacts on absence from school. According to Thornton et al. (2013) the chance of children having attendance problems becomes twice as high when there are or have been many conflicts between



the parents. Also being a witness of violence at home (especially between the parents) and being subject to other forms of maltreatment are strongly related to serious or persistent absence from school (Egger et al., 2003; Kearny, 2008b., Ramirez et al., 2012).

Single-parent families are also more likely to experience poverty, which is strongly associated with serious or persistent absence from school (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Egger et al., 2003; Kearny 2008b, Veenstra et al., 2010). The financial and residential situation of the families is influenced by the absence of one of the biological parents in the majority of the families (Dembo et al., 2012). This shows that even within one microsystem, different risk factors can strengthen each other, which means that problems within one microsystem can easily accumulate. Kearny (2008b) argues that being homeless or living in an unsafe and unsupportive neighbourhood are risk factors for serious absence from school.

Besides family conflict and poverty, there are other family characteristics which have to be taken into account as well. Families of absentees often show poor cohesion, detachment, enmeshment and are isolated (Kearny, 2008a). The likelihood of absence from school increases when the level of parental involvement with the child is low and when the parental supervision is inadequate (Egger et al., 2003; Kearny, 2008b; Sheppard, 2009; Van Breda, 2015). Furthermore, the main language that is spoken at home is of influence on absence from school (Thornton et al., 2013). Finally, weak mental and/or physical health and substance misuse of (one of) the parents is a risk factor for non-attendance at school (Kearny, 2008a). In some cases the young person is not attending school, because he/she is caring for the ill parent. In other cases, the illness of the parent has a negative effect on the family, and thereby increases the likelihood of truancy.

In addition, having a sibling with attendance problems at school or who is displaying delinquent behaviour might also impact on the likelihood of becoming a serious or persistent absentee. Obviously, many risk factors within the family microsystem will be similar for all children within a family and therefore might already increase the chance of more children within the same family becoming persistent absentees, but having an older sibling as a bad role model further enlarges the risk. As McHale, Updegraff and Whiteman (2012) point out, sibling relationships affect the whole family dynamics. Family researchers often overlook the influence of siblings, which might lead to them missing vital information (McHale et al., 2012). The research on serious or persistent absence from school seems to confirm this finding, because many studies have focused on the impact of the family (especially the parents), but there has not been much research into the role of siblings in the onset and progression of serious or persistent absence from school.

### *The school*

Before students become persistent absentees, they spend a large part of their time in school. Therefore, school is an important microsystem which impacts on the development of children. Most research studies that are examining the role of the school into the occurrence of serious absence problems find differences in the attendance levels of schools with more or less the same composition of students, indicating that school factors do impact on absence. Lauchlan (2003) argues that attending a school where truancy is commonplace, increases the likelihood of a new student becoming a serious or persistent absentee.

According to Kearny (2008b), a school climate that does not suit a young person is significantly related to serious absence from school. Therefore, a good school climate can prevent students from not attending school. Nevertheless, what students experience as a good school climate may vary for different students. However, the research literature has established some strong indicators relating to school climate that impact on absence from school. When students are better attached to their school, their academic performance and engagement improve (Thornton et al., 2013). As Claes, Hooghe and Reeskens (2009) point out schools that stimulate participation, try to involve parents and offer a supporting climate do make a difference in the truancy levels. Other studies confirm that a supporting climate is vital for students (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Kearny, 2008b). Attwood and Croll (2006) illustrate that the students they interviewed were not having problems with the school curriculum or school as an academic setting, their main concern was school as a social setting. For example, students mention a tense and disruptive atmosphere or unruly behaviour at school as reasons for their truancy. Therefore, schools being too lenient may increase attendance problems. In contrast, Lauchlan (2003) argues that a too strict enforcement of school rules increases absenteeism from school. So, both allowing unruly behaviour and being too strict have a negative impact on attendance, hence schools should aim for an authoritative and stimulating environment in order to reduce the truancy level at their school (Claes et al., 2009).

Besides the school climate, the individual relationship of a student with the teachers at school effects serious absence from school. This relationship impacts on school absence in different ways. Generally, when the class sizes in a school are large and the student-teacher relationship is impersonal and formal the likelihood of serious absence increases (Lauchlan, 2003). Furthermore, some students have difficulties with accepting the teacher as an authority figure, while in other cases students argue that an inappropriate way of acting of the teachers (sometimes with regards to maintaining order and sometimes with regards to supporting learning) is a reason for them to skip school (Attwood & Croll, 2006). Finally, Verschueren (2009) argues that conflicts between a teacher and a student can have negative consequences for the psychosocial and academic development of the student. Moreover, these conflicts are a vicious circle, the behaviour problems

of a student increase the probability of the onset of a conflict and the conflict itself worsens the behaviour problems.

Debate exists about the effect of being bullied at school on persistent absence from school. Many researchers have established a connection between bullying and non-attendance at school (Egger et al., 2003; Kearny, 2008b; Lauchlan, 2003). However, Attwood and Croll (2006) indicate that while truancy increases in the later years of secondary school, concern over bullying decreases with age at secondary school. Moreover, though some of the persistent truants they interviewed did mention bullying as a reason for their non-attendance at school, they did not establish a significant relation between bullying and truancy in their data from the British Household Panel Survey. Feldman et al. (2014) argue that whilst students in self-reports mention bullying as a reason for absence from school, this connection is often not confirmed when data are analysed. They do, however, indicate that duration of the bullying might impact on the correlation with serious or persistent absence from school. In addition to the duration of bullying, the type of bullying might affect the connection with serious or persistent absence from school. Russel, Sinclair, Poteat and Koenig (2012) distinguish between bias-based and general harassment (or bullying) among adolescents. In their study, bias based bullying included being bullied because of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability and religion. Adolescents who experienced bias-based bullying suffered more from negative health effects compared to the group of non-bias based bullied adolescents, and there was a large association between bias-based bullying and truancy (Russel et al., 2012). Mulvey, Hoffman, Gönültaş, Hope and Cooper (2018) further investigated the distinction between bias-based and non-bias-based bullying. They conclude that young people who experience multiple instances of bias-based bullying because of more than one social identity (for example because of their gender and ethnicity) are more likely to report negative outcomes of being bullied than those who experience non-bias based bullying or single-bias-based (for example only because of gender) bullying. Victims of multiple-bias-based bullying were also at greater risk of avoiding school (Mulvey et al., 2018). Therefore, prejudice-based bullying seems to have a greater impact on absence from school than non-prejudice based bullying.

### *Peers*

During adolescence peers have, just like parents, a strong social influence on students (Cook, Buehler & Henson, 2009). Older adolescents report more resistance to peer influences than younger adolescents (Sumter, Bokhorst, Steinberg & Westenberg, 2009). Therefore, during the secondary school period peers are an important microsystem in which the student is involved and peers might impact on the serious or persistent absence from school.

Where much research is conducted into the role of the family and school into the occurrence of serious or persistent absence from school, not much of the research has focused on the role of peers. However, Lauchlan (2003) argues that having troublesome peers is a risk factor for serious absence from school. This finding is confirmed by Van der Laan, Van der Schans, Bogaerts and Doreleijers (2009), who determine that persistent absentees in the Netherlands have more friends with police contacts and spend more time outside the house with their peers during the week. Conversely, the lack of friendships (at school) can also lead to serious or persistent absence from school. Rönkä, Sunnari, Rautio, Koironen and Taanila (2017) argue that especially girls who are lonely tend to dislike school more often. However, loneliness is more related to the quality than the quantity of friendships (Rönkä et al., 2017). So even absentees who have a lot of friends might feel lonely. In conclusion, the microsystem peers can increase the likelihood of serious or persistent absence in two different ways: by drawing a young person into bad behaviour or through a lack of friendships and loneliness and therefore having no (social) reason to like attending school.

### **2.2.7 The individual**

Both internalising and externalising behaviour problems are related to persistent absence from school. Psychologists have paid attention to emotional problems that lead to children not attending school on a regular basis. Children that display school refusal behaviour are often experiencing one or more anxiety disorders, such as simple or specific phobia, panic disorder, separation anxiety and performance anxiety (Egger, Costello & Angold, 2003; Kearny, 2008a). However, truancy is also connected with emotional disorders; truants are more often depressed than children who do not have attendance problems (Egger et al., 2003). Thornton et al. (2013) point out that more girls are facing emotional problems at primary school than boys. Attwood & Croll (2015) point out that girls at secondary school also are more often experiencing problems with their mental well-being and that this is strongly related to truancy. Besides these emotional problems, persistent or serious absentees also show more often behavioural problems, and there is a strong correlation between internalising and externalising problems by absentees (Egger et al., 2003; Ingul, Klöckner, Silverman & Nordahl, 2012; Wood et al., 2012). Conduct disorder is a common psychiatric disorder among school non-attenders (Egger et al., 2003). Furthermore, throwing tantrums, and displaying aggressive and deviant behaviour are common risk factors among serious or persistent absentees (Egger et al., 2003; Ingul et al., 2012; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Tinkel & Ormel, 2010).

Therefore, most researchers agree that both emotional and behavioural problems or both internalising and externalising problem behaviour are connected to persistent or serious absence from school. However, where Thornton et al. (2013) conclude that mainly emotional problems have a negative impact on attendance, Ingul et al. (2012) argue that externalising problems are the

strongest predictor of serious absence from school. They mention that internalising problems are also a risk factor but they do not predict absenteeism in itself. Possibly, the age of the children studied is the reason for these different findings. Thornton et al. (2013) conducted their research among primary school children compared to adolescents in the study of Ingul et al. (2012). Consequently, it might be that for primary school children emotional problems are a stronger predictor of serious absence from school and for secondary school children conduct problems have a greater impact. This is in line with the finding of Dube and Orpinas (2009) that upper elementary school children have a different absenteeism profile than middle school children. Finally, it needs to be mentioned that the direction of the causal relationship between these mental health problems and absenteeism is unclear. Wood et al. (2012) conclude that in some cases absenteeism is a predictor for the development of psychopathology and in other cases the psychopathology predicts absenteeism.

Furthermore, a strong relationship exists between sleep problems and school absenteeism. Distinct types of sleep problems are related to persistent or serious absence from school. For example, refusal to sleep alone, nightmares, fatigue and insomnia are all connected to absence from school (Egger et al., 2003). A short sleep duration and sleep deficiency are, however, most strongly related to not attending school (Hysing, Haugland, Stormark, Bøe & Sivertsen, 2015). Other individual factors associated with serious absence from school are chronic illness and somatic complaints (Egger et al., 2003; Ingul et al., 2012).

### **2.2.8 Overview**

Using Farrington's risk and protective factors paradigm to apply the theoretical framework to serious or persistent absence from school indicates that there are risk factors for serious or persistent absence from school at each of the distinct levels, although the impact of the factors at the individual and microsystem level is the most direct and therefore factors at these levels are probably more easily recognised and certainly are addressed mostly in the research evidence. It is important, however, to also recognise the influence of factors a bit further away from the individual, where the impact might be more indirect, to come to a full conceptualisation of the problem.

Therefore, the theoretical framework (and especially the ecological systems theory) will be used throughout the rest of this thesis. Some chapters will strongly emphasise one specific part of the ecological systems theory. Chapter 3, for example, will address many possible influences at the macrosystem level by comparing England and the Netherlands on various terrains related to school attendance. Other chapters (such as the results chapters) address more than one system, but might provide more detail about some of the systems. However, by the end of this thesis, the impact of

factors at all levels will have been discussed. Therefore, the conception of the problem should then be as complete as possible for the wicked and complex problem of serious or persistent absence from school. Whilst the goal of this thesis is to create a complete and holistic understanding of serious or persistent absence from school, this does not necessarily mean that governments should also aim for the holistic problem solving strategy that Daviter (2017) sets out (See Chapter 1). The conceptualisation of the problem might actually indicate that a coping or a taming strategy would be better. But in order to establish which strategy would be best, having a good conceptualisation of the problem is key and this theoretical framework allows for a comprehensive and complete analysis of serious or persistent absence from school.

## **2.3 Offending behaviour**

One of the aims of this research project is to establish the impact of the level of offending behaviour on serious or persistent absence from school. A strong correlation exists between serious or persistent absence from school and juvenile delinquency (Dembo et al., 2012; Weerman & Van der Laan, 2006). However, it is unclear whether there is a causal relationship between absence from school and offending behaviour. As Weerman and Van der Laan (2006) point out, it is possible that the connection between the two can be explained by the comparability of the factors that underlie both persistent absence and juvenile offending behaviour. This section will, therefore, review the research evidence on offending behaviour in relation to absence from school. It will start off with criminological literature on the link between (not) attending school and offending. It will then discuss risk factors for juvenile delinquency. Finally, the similarities and differences between juvenile offending behaviour and serious or persistent absence from school will be discussed.

### **2.3.1 Offending behaviour and attending school**

This section deals with two ways in which (not) attending school can impact on juvenile offending behaviour. First of all, young people can commit antisocial or criminal behaviour at school. Secondly, young people who do not attend school regularly may have more time to commit crimes. These two ways in which schools and offending behaviour could be connected will be discussed in more detail in this section.

#### *In-school anti-social or criminal behaviour*

School is not only a place where children acquire academic skills, but it is also a place where young people learn and practice their social skills. Hayden (2011) distinguishes, in the concluding chapter of an edited volume, between ‘effective’ and ‘affective’ schooling, where ‘effective’ schooling is

about cognitive achievement and 'affective' schooling mainly about attitudes and behaviour and how this helps to get socially desirable outcomes (one of which is a reduction in offending behaviour). The 'affective' schooling principle does not mean, however, that there are no students who will display antisocial or criminal behaviour at the school site.

According to Millie and Moore (2011) disruptive behaviour of young people at schools in the UK is nowadays much earlier seen and dealt with as criminal behaviour. Behaviour in schools that used to be part of the educational discipline policy is now reported to police officers (often present at the school site). Millie and Moore (2011) view this as the criminalisation of educational policy. This seems to be in line with a trend seen in the USA by many scholars and which leads to a school-to-prison pipeline (Mallett 2016; McCarter, 2017; Rocque et al., 2017). The school-to-prison pipeline indicates that school disciplinary practices can be the start of a pathway into the juvenile or adult criminal justice system (McCarter, 2017). Mallett (2016) specifically mentions three forms of school discipline that are commonly used in US schools: in-school detentions, suspensions (i.e. fixed-term exclusions) and being expelled (i.e. permanent exclusions). He further argues that these harsh discipline policies are likely to make the outcome for truants only worse, and instead advocates more measures aimed at prevention (Mallett, 2016). It mostly are young people who are already at-risk (e.g. students with disabilities, students of colour or LGBTQ students), who get caught up in the school-to-prison pipeline in the US (Mallett 2016; McCarter, 2017). Holt (2011) indicates that parents of excluded young people in the UK also point towards a permanent exclusion as the turning point for the young person from only misbehaving in school towards committing offences outside the school. Therefore, these parents experienced the disciplinary measure of the exclusion of their child also as the start of a pathway into juvenile offending behaviour.

Yet, some young people do actually display criminal behaviour in school. Holt (2011) describes the incidents that led to exclusion for the young people in her research and this included thefts and criminal damage towards school property, and fighting with other students. Millie and Moore (2011) suggest that there are different behaviours at the school that can be classed as anti-social or criminal behaviour: school vandalism, attacks on the school staff and bullying. They also indicate that it is hard to find information on the number of offences that are committed inside or against the school (Millie & Moore, 2011), but it is certain that some students do commit crimes whilst at school. The next part of this section will, however, look more closely into the relationship between not attending school regularly and offending behaviour.

#### *Not attending school and the connection with juvenile offending behaviour*

The school-to-prison pipeline seems to suggest that being (permanently) excluded from school can lead to committing offences and involvement with the criminal justice system. However, Hayward,

Stephenson and Blyth (2004) suggest that absence from school is connected with offending behaviour but that the reason for the school absence (e.g. truancy or exclusion) does not matter. This is supported by the findings of Fischer and Argyle (2018) who conducted research into schools in rural areas of the US who implemented a four-day school week. They found a twenty percent increase in youth crime as a result of the introduction of the four-day school week. These studies therefore, seem to support the idea that not being in school (and therefore not being supervised) increases the opportunity for young people to commit crimes and thereby increases the number of crimes committed.

This apparent link between not attending school (on a specific day) and committing crimes, however, does still mean that truanting and excluded young people are also more likely to offend. So, even though the exclusion or the truanting might not be the actual reason to commit a crime, it does give the young person more opportunity. McAra and McVie (2016) demonstrate, for example, that a reduction in truancy is connected to a reduction in violence. Millie and Moore (2011) indicate, therefore, that policies aimed at reducing truancy not only do so because of the educational disadvantage for truanting students, but also because it could lead to a reduction in crimes committed by juveniles. Preventing serious or persistent absence from school can thus also be seen as a key towards a reduction in juvenile offending behaviour.

### **2.3.2 Risk factors for offending behaviour**

Zara and Farrington (2013) argue, based on risk scales that were developed from the longitudinal large-scale Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, that offending behaviour cannot be explained by one single risk factor, but by an accumulation of different risk factors that are persistent over time. Mallett (2016) indicates that the risk of involvement in the youth justice system usually does not increase due to a single risk factor but due to a combination of different risk factors. This section will, therefore, address risk factors (or combinations of risk factors) for juvenile offending behaviour at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

There are many risk factors at the individual level associated with juvenile offending behaviour. Early anti-social behaviour is a powerful predictor of early-onset offending (Zara & Farrington, 2013). This finding is supported by Byrd, Loeber and Pardini (2012) who argue that disruptive behaviour disorders, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorders, predict juvenile offending behaviour (Byrd, Loeber & Pardini, 2012). Mann and Reynolds (2006) argue that children who show problem behaviour and have low social skills are at greater risk of becoming delinquents. Murray and Farrington (2010) conducted a meta study into individual, social and family risk factors for juvenile offending behaviour; they mention low IQ, impulsiveness and weak school achievements as individual risk factors associated



with offending behaviour. Although there has been debate about the reliability of the factor low IQ in relation to offending behaviour. Block (1995) contests, for example, the finding by Lynam, Moffitt and Stouthamer-Loeber (1993) that the relationship between a low IQ and delinquency is not mediated by impulsivity. He argues that when analysed differently, impulsivity is actually the main reason for the relationship between low IQ and offending behaviour. McAra and McVie (2016, p.75) suggest that 'violence is a response to, and a mechanism utilized by young people for overcoming, experiences of vulnerability and adversity.' So, they indicate that there is a connection between victimization and violent behaviour.

Furthermore, family risk factors are of great influence on early-onset offending (Zara & Farrington, 2013). According to Mann and Reynolds (2006) child abuse and neglect between the ages of 4 and 11 is the family factor most strongly related to delinquency at a later age. Along with child abuse, conflicts between the parents, disrupted families, poor parental supervision, punitive or erratic parental discipline, cold parental attitude, antisocial parents and a large family are risk factors connected to offending behaviour (Murray & Farrington, 2010). In addition the socio-economic situation in which a child is raised impacts on offending behaviour. Young offenders often come from low income families and live in poor housing (Murray & Farrington, 2010; Zara and Farrington, 2013).

Some school related factors are associated with offending behaviour in diverse research studies. Children who make a lot of school transitions are less likely to be involved in school activities and to follow school rules and are more likely to become juvenile offenders (Mann & Reynolds, 2006). According to Murray and Farrington (2010) attending a school with a high delinquency rate increases the likelihood of becoming a young offender. This is probably also related to the risk factor of living in a high crime neighbourhood (Murray & Farrington, 2010). Therefore, there seems to be a link between poor school attendance and behaviour, exclusions and offending behaviour.

Finally, peers can be of influence on involvement with the juvenile criminal justice system. Slagt, Dubas, Deković, Haselager and Van Aken (2015) conclude that for Dutch adolescents perceiving their friends to display delinquent behaviour led to an increase in juvenile offending behaviour (by that adolescent) one year later. They also found that the level of conscientiousness moderates the effect of perceived delinquent friends. So, adolescents with a low level of conscientiousness are more likely to be influenced by the perceived delinquency of their friends (Slagt et al., 2015). Thomas (2015) supports the idea that adolescents with delinquent friends are more likely to commit crimes. Moreover, the specific type of crime in which the peers specialise is also the type of crime the adolescent is more likely to commit. So, a young person who is friends with someone who commits many thefts is more likely to start committing thefts (Thomas, 2015).

These studies clearly indicate that for adolescents the impact of having delinquent peers on future offending behaviour is large.

#### *Similarities and differences between risk factors*

There is much overlap between the risk factors for offending behaviour (that were described above) and the risk factors for serious or persistent absence from school (that were described in section 2.2.6 and 2.2.7). This picture is corroborated by a limited number of research studies into the differences and similarities between serious absentees and juvenile offenders in court samples, who report great overlap in the risk factors experienced. However, these studies imply that there are some distinctions between serious or persistent absentees and young offenders as well. For example, Gavazzi, Yarcheck and Lim (2005) suggest that status offenders<sup>1</sup> provide the youth justice system with a unique task, because status offences are less serious than many other crimes, however, they are often related to mental health or social skill problems and therefore might indicate future problems. Moreover they argue that status offenders show greater risk at the family level than the overall court sample. This finding is confirmed by Van der Laan et al. (2009) who point out that Dutch persistent absentees show significantly more risk at all levels (e.g. family, individual) except substance use compared with juveniles that have to appear in court for other crimes. Furthermore, Van der Woude, van der Stouwe & Stams (2017) indicate, based on their study of 365 Dutch juveniles who received a penal sanction, that Dutch truants receive more parental punishment compared to Dutch offenders. This suggests that truancy is related to a strict parenting style, whereas offending behaviour is often linked to a weak parenting style (Van der Woude et al., 2017). Finally, truants are more often female and at higher risk of continued involvement in the justice system than young people whose first offense is not truancy. However, the future offences of truants are less serious than those of young people committing another first offence (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barret & Willson, 2007).

Because of the similarity between the risk factors for juvenile offending behaviour and persistent absence from school, it is not surprising that there is a strong correlation between serious or persistent absence from school and offending behaviour. Yet, the causal direction remains unclear and absence from school and offending can and do occur simultaneously. Unfortunately, the specific research into the differences and similarities between persistent absentees and young offenders is very limited. However, a cautious conclusion on the basis of a few research studies might be that although the risk factors young offenders and persistent absentees are experiencing

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<sup>1</sup> Status offences are offences that are punishable for children, but after reaching a certain age not anymore (e.g. drinking alcohol and smoking). Since education is only compulsory up to a certain age - in countries where the young person is legally responsible for absence from school - truancy is a status offence.

are very similar, persistent absentees show even greater risk at all levels than young offenders; i.e. serious or persistent absentees on average seem to experience more risk factors within and between different systems of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3) and fewer protective factors (See Farrington's risk and protective factor paradigm, Chapter 1) compared to juvenile offenders. This might impact on how to respond to serious or persistent absentees in comparison to juvenile offenders, but more research is needed into the similarities and differences between juvenile offending behaviour and serious or persistent absence from school.

## **2.4 Vulnerability of serious or persistent absentees**

### **2.4.1 Defining vulnerability**

The term vulnerability is used in a range of different ways by scholars from many different disciplines. It is sometimes used in relation to Farrington's risk- and protective factors paradigm; vulnerable people are then seen as 'at risk' of developing a specific form of problematic behaviour. For example, Tucker (2013) describes young people in school who are 'at risk' of becoming excluded as vulnerable. On the other hand, characteristics of people can make them also more vulnerable to becoming a victim of a crime. When certain features of an individual or a group of people increase the likelihood of, for example, becoming a victim of sexual abuse, these individuals or groups of people can be marked as 'vulnerable'. In both these examples, vulnerability is defined in relation to a specific problem, however there are also more general definitions of vulnerability in which a vulnerable individual is seen as more likely to experience a number of different adverse outcomes.

Potter and Brotherton (2013) point out that policy makers are interested in classifying individuals or groups of people as vulnerable, because this gives them an indication of how to spend the available resources most effectively to reduce a certain problem. Historically there have been two dominant and competing ideologies in how to define who is vulnerable and who is not. Firstly, there is the structural explanation of vulnerability in which vulnerability is caused by social and economic circumstances that are for a large part outside the control of the individual, such as poverty, unemployment and housing difficulties (Potter & Brotherton, 2013). This structural explanation of vulnerability, in which individuals do not have much responsibility, is linked to the political left and was popular in the post-war consensus of the British welfare state (Cronin & Brotherton, 2013). The second explanation of vulnerability, conversely, views vulnerability as a result of poor (moral) choices made by the individual and links it to factors such as substance misuse or low educational attainment (Potter & Brotherton, 2013). This view, in which vulnerable groups and individuals are blamed and held responsible for their own vulnerability, is associated with the

political right and seems to be the more popular explanation in contemporary social policy (Cronin & Brotherton, 2013). So, how vulnerability is defined has changed over the years and seems intertwined with political ideology, which means that even at the same point in time different people might hold different views about what constitutes vulnerability. Although Cronin and Brotherton (2013) argue that the second explanation has been dominant in the political discourse since Thatcher and was continued under New Labour and the Coalition Government, many research studies seem to emphasise factors outside the control of individuals when they discuss vulnerability. Therefore, much research has established the impact of factors beyond the control of the individual on vulnerability, and often encourages policy makers to address these structural social and economic factors that create large vulnerable groups within modern Western societies. Hence, research findings often seem more in line with the first explanation of vulnerability.

#### **2.4.2 Applying vulnerability to serious or persistent absentees**

Mechanic and Tanner (2007) point out that vulnerability accumulates over the life course of a person. Subsequently, the impact of being subject to adverse social and economic structural circumstances (like poverty) at a young age will be visible throughout the life of that person. This means that having a disadvantaged start in life may contribute to experiencing adversities and displaying problem behaviour later in life. Section 2.2 already showed that serious or persistent absence from school is related to many different risk factors at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory. In many cases these risk factors, such as poverty, being a witness of domestic violence and physical or mental health problems, started already at a young age. And in line with the first explanation of vulnerability mentioned above, many of these risk factors are outside the control of the child/young person. These risk factors increase the likelihood of becoming a serious or persistent absentee, but are also related to other negative outcomes later in life.

However, in some cases two siblings grow up in the same vulnerable family circumstances, but only one of them becomes a serious or persistent absentee. This suggests either that persistent absence is often a result of a combination of the first and second explanation of vulnerability, so the young person experiences adverse circumstances outside their control, but also makes the wrong choice by not attending school regularly, or there might be different factors at other levels (for example individual characteristics) which cause one sibling to become a serious or persistent absentee and not the other. As Carroll (2015) points out that whilst some negative factors are associated with poor attendance, not all pupils with poor attendance experienced all those factors and some pupils with good attendance had experienced one of these negative factors. What is clear, however, is that many serious or persistent absentees are subjected to an accumulation of

risk factors at different levels of the ecological system (Van der Laan et al., 2009). Since almost all serious or persistent absentees have to deal with at least one risk factor, they are all vulnerable young people to some extent. Yet, some serious or persistent absentees are subjected to more adversities and risk factors than others. As Gorard and Siddiqui (2019) indicate, however, it is not so much the amount of different risk factors a young person is being subjected to, but rather the duration and precise pattern of childhood disadvantage that can predict educational outcomes.

The literature review did not uncover research studies (in England, the Netherlands or international) that have specifically addressed the vulnerability of serious or persistent absentees or vulnerability of young people at school. Yet, Tucker (2013) establishes that school managers and teachers distinguish between internal school-based vulnerability (created by behaviour problems at school or learning problems) and external vulnerability (for example caused by factors within the family, peers or loneliness) when discussing the vulnerability of pupils in danger of becoming temporary or permanently excluded from secondary school. The views of these professionals working at schools, therefore, reiterate that vulnerability can exist at different levels of the ecological system's theory. Watson and Christenson (2017), on the other hand, predefined specific groups of youth as vulnerable (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer (LGBTQ), homeless, disabled, racial/ethnic minority and/or poor students). They argue that these groups more often experience a hostile school climate, weak academic performance and have higher absenteeism rates. Mallett (2016) also suggests that although many students become truants, vulnerable and already at-risk students are disproportionately affected. These findings indicate that there is indeed a connection between vulnerability and serious or persistent absence from school.

The previous section discussed the relationship between serious or persistent absence from school and juvenile offending behaviour. There is, however, also research conducted into the vulnerability of young offenders. The main question raised by these research studies is to what extent it is right to blame (and even punish) the often very vulnerable young person for the delinquent behaviour. In this respect, Dehaghani (2017) points out that the younger a child is the more vulnerable they usually are deemed to be. This means that the older a child/young person gets the more society will hold the young person responsible for committed offences. This is reflected in the age of criminal responsibility, which is 10 in England and 12 in the Netherlands. However, with vulnerability accumulating over the life course of a person (Mechanic & Tanner, 2007), young offenders, often vulnerable when they were children, are likely to still be very vulnerable when they commit a crime. McAra and McVie (2016) argue - based on their findings from The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, which is a prospective longitudinal study of 4300 young people in Scotland - that young people involved in violence should be treated as vulnerable children and not as offenders. They indicate that these young people are often

vulnerable due to risk factors outside their control (this is in line with the structural explanation of vulnerability distinguished by Potter and Brotherton, 2013). Moreover, McAra and McVie (2016) indicate that it is not fair to only blame the young person, because the violence often occurs as a result of an interaction with school and/or family and they are therefore partly responsible as well.

#### *The use of the vulnerability concept in this research project*

One of the aims of this research project was to explore the impact of the level of vulnerability on serious or persistent absence from school. The above sections, however, indicate that there are many different ways in which vulnerability can be defined. Although vulnerability could be viewed as a continuum from low to high on which young people could be placed, the concept has to be dichotomous for this research project. Tuck (2013) has pointed out that it is the responsibility of the state to look after the most vulnerable children in society. Children who have been taken into care, therefore, belong to the most vulnerable children in society (Hayden & Jenkins, 2015). So, for this research project the variable 'taken into care' will be used to distinguish between vulnerable and less vulnerable serious or persistent absentees.

## **2.5 Schools and education based research on school attendance**

The majority of young people in both the Netherlands and England do attend school regularly. Many young people actually like going to school, although as international surveys indicate the percentage of young people who like school does differ between countries (See Chapter 3). School gives young people the opportunity to learn and obtain a qualification, but also serves as a place to socialise with their peers. These benefits of attending school are apparently not great enough for serious or persistent absentees to attend school every day. Schools and education based research into attendance, therefore, tends to focus on the following question: which school factors play a role in whether or not students attend school regularly? In this section, research on disengagement and disaffection, exclusion and integration and school bullying will be discussed to portray how schools and education based research answers this question.

### **2.5.1 Disengagement and disaffection**

The concepts of disengagement and disaffection from school seem to be related to serious or persistent absence from school. For example, according to Rocque et al. (2017) truancy, so wilfully missing school, is an indicator of disengagement from school. However, one clear definition of disengagement and disaffection from school does not exist. Some researchers seem to use the two terms interchangeably, whereas others give clearly separate definitions of the two terms. Lumby (2012), for example, argues that disaffected young people hold a negative view towards school or college, but do still participate in education. Disengaged pupils, on the other hand, not only hold

negative views, but are also not participating in education anymore to some degree (Lumby, 2012). In line with these definitions, serious or persistent absentees will often be both disaffected and disengaged. However, in his study on dealing with disaffection, Allan (2014) only classes students as disaffected when they are disaffected with learning and are actively disengaged. So, he treats disengagement as a prerequisite for being classed as disaffected. Darmody and Thornton (2015, p. 29) argue that 'disaffected and disengaged students tend to associate school with negative experiences'. They do, therefore, not distinguish between being disaffected and being disengaged at all. Despite the definitions used being slightly different, it is clear that both disaffection and disengagement are connected to serious or persistent absence from school.

So, a disaffected or disengaged young person holds negative views about school and this may or may not result in irregular attendance. But how do young people become disaffected or disengaged from school? Disaffection can exist at different levels; there are emotional, cognitive and behavioural elements that impact on engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Emotional engagement or affection relates to students' feelings in the classroom and at school; students might be happy, interested and satisfied or they could be bored, sad and anxious. Students who have negative emotions at school or towards school tend to identify themselves less with school than their peers with more positive feelings, and this may result in irregular attendance at school. Cognitive engagement is about the desire to learn. Cognitively engaged students value the learning process and are not just working towards achieving goals, they like to be challenged and are intrinsically motivated (Frederiks et al., 2004). Cognitively disengaged students, on the other hand, miss the motivation to learn and therefore value attending school and learning a lot less compared to their engaged peers. Finally, there are three aspects of behavioural engagement: positive conduct, involvement in learning and academic tasks and participation in extracurricular but school-related activities (Frederiks et al., 2004). A student who is behaviourally engaged, therefore, often has a good experience with attending school and has clear links with the school.

These different types of engagement do overlap at some points. What is clear, however, is that students who value and enjoy learning, are feeling good at school and do view school as more than just a place they are forced to attend are more likely to be engaged. These students are also more likely to attend regularly. Disengaged students, on the contrary, do not have a sense of belonging to a school and their academic performance often is not as good as that of engaged students. The three types of engagement, emotional, cognitive and behavioural, distinguished by Fredericks et al. (2004), focus mainly on aspects related to the individual (the inner circle in Bronfenbrenner's social ecological theory, See Chapter 1 Figure 3). However, Darmody and Thornton (2015) suggest that disaffection or disengagement from school often is the result of a mix of personal, family and institutional factors. According to them, disaffection occurs due to a

complex interplay between individual factors and choices and factors at school. Allan (2014) also points towards the important role of the environment in the development of disaffection from school. This complex interplay of different factors at different levels that could result in severe disaffection from school means that it is not easy to point to one or two reasons of why some young people become disaffected from school. But it is clear that students who enjoy attending school, are performing well and have a sense of belonging to their school are less at risk of becoming disaffected and disengaged from school.

#### *Preventing disaffection from school*

Disengagement and disaffection can be linked to truancy and exclusion (Darmody & Thornton, 2015). It is therefore important to prevent young people from becoming disengaged or disaffected from school. The complex interplay of factors at different levels that leads to the onset of disaffection makes it challenging for schools to reduce disaffection from school. It is difficult for schools to impact on students' personal and family factors, yet they can change some aspects of the education they are offering to better suit individual students. Allan (2014), for example, conducted research into the effects of work based learning on levels of affection with school. The results indicate that a work-based learning programme can be effective in improving student affection as long as students still have to attend school at least one day a week. So, a vocational training programme in which students learn in a workplace four days a week, but remain linked with the school by attending the school one day a week, can improve students feelings towards education and might lead to a reduction in disaffection from school.

#### **2.5.2 Exclusion and reintegration**

Although recent policy in both England and the Netherlands has a strong focus on inclusion of all young people (including young people with emotional, behavioural and learning difficulties) in mainstream education, some young people still get fixed-term or permanently excluded from school. Challenging behavior is the main reason for permanent exclusions from school. There seems to be a strong tension between compulsory schooling and children's right to education on the one hand, and the possibility of being excluded from school on the other hand; whilst young people and/or their parents can be punished when a young person rejects a school by not attending regularly, schools are allowed to prohibit young people from attending by permanently or temporarily excluding them. This tension appears to be even stronger in the Netherlands, where home schooling is not allowed. In both countries, however, alternative education provision is in place to prevent temporarily or permanently excluded young people from not being able to attend



school at all. One of the aims of these alternative provisions remains to reintegrate young people back to mainstream educational provision.

### *Reasons for and consequences of exclusion from school*

Much educational change has focused on inclusion in school recently (McCluskey, Riddell & Weedon, 2015). As Russell and Thomson (2011) point out there are many policies aimed at reducing the number of exclusions from school, however, at the same time there is an enormous pressure on schools to remove those young people that are causing trouble, in order to ensure a better learning climate for the other students at the school. This pressure comes from parents and some politicians, but is also a consequence of schools wanting to perform well in league tables (Russell & Thomson, 2011). This means there is a tension between official policy documents to reduce school exclusions and pressure put on schools to remove disruptive students.

There is wide research evidence to suggest that some groups of young people are more likely to be excluded from school than others (Pirrie, Macleod, Cullen & McCluskey, 2011; Briggs, 2010; McCluskey, 2008;). In England, boys are more often permanently and fixed-term excluded from school than girls (DFE, 2018b). ). Most young people who are permanently excluded are between 12 and 14 years old (DFE, 2018b). This suggests that young people are most likely to be permanently excluded during their first years in secondary school. However, as Pirrie et al. (2011) indicate many permanently excluded young people have already experienced severely disrupted educational pathways prior to their permanent exclusion from school. Other common characteristics among permanently excluded young people are emotional, behavioural and learning difficulties. These learning problems are often increased by the disrupted educational pathways and the poor attendance of these young people (Pirrie et al., 2011). So, there seems to be a connection between serious or persistent absence from school and school exclusions. It is not only factors on the individual level, however, that seem to contribute to the likelihood of being excluded. Exclusions are also more common among young people from urban areas, ethnic minorities and poor families (McCluskey et al., 2015; Briggs, 2010). Furthermore, most excluded young people experienced challenging family circumstances (Pirrie et al., 2011).

Young people who have been permanently excluded from school are, just as persistent absentees, less likely to do well later in life. Permanent exclusion has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes (Pirrie et al., 2011). Permanently excluded young people spend fewer time in school, they are more likely to be influenced by peers and are at greater risk to become either involved in crime or to become a victim of crime (Briggs, 2010). Welsh and Little (2018) suggest, after a systematic literature review of 71 American studies into the outcomes for excluded young

people, that exclusion from school is not a good response to misbehavior due to the many negative educational and life outcomes excluded students experience.

#### *Alternative provisions and reintegration*

Schools and local authorities have to find an alternative educational provision after a young person is permanently excluded from school. Alternative provision could be any form of schooling that is not in a mainstream school (McCluskey et al., 2015). In England, many excluded young people go to a PRU. One of the main goals of these units and of many other alternative provisions is reintegration into mainstream education. McCluskey et al. (2015) indicate that most excluded young people and their parents are very positive about their experiences in alternative provisions. They experience more attention for their individual situation and usually compare it to the bad experience they have had with mainstream education. Even though the views of parents and young people of alternative provisions are often very positive, outcomes for these young people are generally very poor and the reintegration rates are low (McCluskey et al., 2015). This finding is confirmed by Briggs (2010) who argues that this might be due to a lack of communication between the alternative education provisions and schools. Furthermore, he argues that attendance rates of young people at the alternative provisions are also very low, which means that these young people will only get further behind with their schoolwork. This is in line with the findings of Thomas (2015), who suggests that the longer a student has attended a PRU before attempting reintegration the less likely it is a successful reintegration into a mainstream school will be established. In addition, Thomas (2015) indicates that parental support, schools with an inclusive ethos, adequately trained staff and support from the PRU (to the student, family and the mainstream school) are important factors to achieve a successful reintegration into mainstream education.

#### *Connection between exclusion and serious or persistent absence from school*

The previous sections indicate that there is a large overlap between serious or persistent absence from school and exclusion from school. Not only suffer many young people who are excluded from school also from serious absence problems, the adverse outcomes that young people in both groups experience also seem very similar. In addition, many serious or persistent absentees in the sample for this research project have also been fixed term or permanently excluded from school. Finally, attendance issues do not end when young people are excluded from school, because attendance rates in alternative education provisions are often very poor (Briggs, 2010).

### **2.5.3 School bullying**

Section 2.2.6 demonstrates that while most research points towards being bullied as a risk factor for serious or persistent absence from school, Attwood and Croll (2006) did not find a significant relationship. Some of their interviewees, did however mention being bullied as a reason for their non-attendance. Feldman et al. (2014) also indicate there is no correlation between being a victim of bullying and poor school attendance. They do argue that whilst youth self-report studies often do indicate that being bullied leads to school avoidance, research studies based on large data sets do not confirm the findings of these self-report research studies. So, there seems to be conflicting evidence on the effect of being bullied on school attendance. Feldman et al. (2014) argue, however, that it is possible that the duration of being bullied impacts on whether or not it leads to absence problems at school; so being subjected to ongoing bullying over a long period of time might lead to serious or persistent absence from school. It certainly is not the case that all young people who become serious or persistently absent from school have experienced bullying, but some research studies do indicate that being bullied does have an impact on the absence from school of some young people. Gastic (2008), for example, established a significant effect of being a victim of bullying on excessive absence, but not on often being late and missing class frequently. Compared to young people who were not bullied, the victims of bullying have 58 percent more chance of being excessively absent from school (Gastic, 2008).

Feldman et al. (2014) point out that there is a connection between female bullying and absence from school. Girls, who bully others at school, are more likely to experience disciplinary problems at school, have lower academic achievement and lower school attendance (Feldman et al., 2014). They indicate that mainly the behaviour problems these girls display at school seem to be related to the other negative outcomes. In this respect it is interesting that Gastic (2008) indicates that victims of bullying at school were also more likely to get into trouble at school, being suspended (in-school or out-of-school) and having to switch to a different school because of disciplinary problems. This suggests that the connection between being a victim of bullying and serious or persistent absence from school not only exists because bullied young people refuse to attend school, but also because victims of bullying are more likely to create problems at school which increases their risk of being excluded. Therefore, the link between serious or persistent absence from school and school bullying seems to be related to various issues.

So, both bullying and being bullied is related to externalising behaviour problems at school, but as Graham (2016) points out there is also a correlation between being bullied and mental health problems (such as depression and low self-esteem). Furthermore, there is a negative connection between being bullied and school functioning (academic achievement and attendance), but this might also be due to the emotional distress and physical complaints the bullying led to (Graham,

2016). In conclusion, most research evidence points towards a correlation between both bullying and being a victim of bullying and persistent absence from school, but the duration of the bullying seems an important factor in the size of the effect.

#### **2.5.4 Summary**

Schools and education based research have pointed towards numerous school-based factors that impact on the regular attendance and thereby on the onset of serious or persistent absence from school. These factors within the school microsystem (see Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Chapter 1 Figure 3) seem to be reinforcing each other and/or factors at other levels of the ecological system's theory. For example, being bullied can correlate with disruptive behaviour at school or with internalising mental health problems. So, the school and education based research on serious or persistent absence from school does provide support for the view that serious or persistent absence from school is indeed a very complex and wicked problem, possibly influenced by many different factors.

### **2.6 Responding to serious or persistent absence from school**

The previous sections point out that serious or persistent absentees are at considerable risk of developing further problems. Therefore, successful intervention in the lives of these serious absentees is desirable both for the individuals involved and for society. However, as Sutphen, Ford and Flaherty (2010) indicate based on their metareview of 16 evaluative studies into the effects of truancy interventions not enough good quality evaluative research into the effectiveness of truancy interventions has been conducted thus far; in the United States only one research study between 1990 and 2007 investigated the effectiveness of a court designated intervention for truancy. This lack of evaluative research into truancy intervention programs in the US is even more surprising considering the large number of programs available (Maynard, McCrea, Pigott & Kelly, 2013). Still, most evaluative research into the effectiveness of truancy interventions is conducted in the US, which suggests that the lack of research into the effectiveness of different responses to serious or persistent absence from school is even more pronounced in the UK, the Netherlands and the rest of Europe. Another problem with the current evaluative studies is that too many of them only focus on short-term effects (reducing unauthorised absence), yet this does not provide information on the changes in individual attendance and the academic performance of students (Dembo et al., 2012). This section will first discuss more general research into different types of interventions that might be used for serious or persistent absence from school, subsequently the evaluative research into some intervention programs are addressed.

### **2.6.1 Intervention types**

Early or preventive interventions seem to be more successful than curative interventions to tackle persistent absence from school (De Baat & Messing, 2012; Dembo et al., 2012). Sameroff and Fiese (2000) mention three requirements, of which the first two fit in well with the ecological system's approach used in this research (See Chapter 1), that are necessary for profitable early intervention in general - not specifically aimed at serious or persistent absence from school. Firstly, the recognition that child development is influenced by multiple contributors at different levels of the ecology of the child. Secondly, at all these levels multiple processes impact on family interactions. Finally, an intervention should be specified to the specific child and the family. This means that there is no universal intervention that will work for all children who are serious or persistent absentees. Therefore, it is important to consider the level of risk of a child before starting an intervention aimed at serious or persistent absence from school. Intervening too intensive into the life of a low-risk child can even have adverse effects and might increase the problem behaviour (Dembo et al., 2012).

Most serious absence intervention programs focus on children who already display absence from school. However, interventions differ in the setting(s) they focus on, the children they target and the intervention instruments used. Kearny (2008a) distinguishes between medical interventions, somatic procedures, clinical interventions and systemic interventions, whereas Lauchlan (2003) differentiates between systemic, individual and group approaches to intervention. Because medical, somatic and clinical interventions are generally used for children who show school refusal behaviour (these children often have emotional disorders such as school phobia or separation anxiety disorder), this literature review will focus more on the systemic, individual and group approaches.

Any intervention aimed at serious absence from school should focus on the specific reasons of a child for not attending school (Dube & Orpinas, 2009). Many researchers argue that because of the heterogeneity of causes underlying persistent absence from school, holistic multimodal interventions that address problems in different settings through the collaboration of multiple services will produce the best results in improving school attendance (Burik, Elderman, Persoon & Rutten, 2007; Dembo et al., 2012; Dembo & Gullledge, 2009; Flannery, Frank & McGrath Kato, 2012; Sheldon, 2007). Strand & Lovrich (2014) evaluated a multimodal intervention targeting truants by setting up a school-based community truancy board (in which school, community and court personnel had a meeting with the family). Truants who took part in this intervention had more positive school outcomes than the matched control group who did not participate in the intervention programme; they graduated more often and dropped out less often (Strand & Lovrich, 2014). However, the allocation to the intervention versus control group was not random but based

on the high school the students were attending (the intervention ran in one school and the control group was created by selecting students from three other schools).

According to Sutphen et al. (2010) the results of these multimodal interventions are mixed, and social workers perform better when they are working directly with students and families compared to working in large-scale community collaborations. In addition, Maynard et al. (2013) conclude after their review of 16 evaluations of truancy interventions that the evidence does not support the claim that multimodal and collaborative interventions produce better results compared with simple non-collaborative interventions. Although multimodal intervention can address several risk factors, the implementation issues may reduce their success, whereas less complex interventions which are easier to implement may therefore be more successful (Maynard et al., 2013). Consequently, while a multimodal intervention is potentially more effective because it can concentrate on the magnitude of risk factors serious or persistent absentees are often facing at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3), only when the complex intervention programme is implemented adequately it might indeed produce better results than a single-modal intervention. Furthermore, because serious or persistent absence from school is a wicked problem, it might not be possible to solve the issue completely and interventions may therefore better focus on coping or taming the problem (Daviter, 2017) (See Chapter 1).

Interventions can be school-based, community-based and court-based. According to Claes et al. (2009) truancy is an education problem and not a law and order problem. This means that it is very important to address risk factors specific for truants when intervening, instead of using the same interventions as for young offenders (Van der Woude et al., 2017). However, there seems to be no difference between the effectiveness of court-based intervention programs compared to school-based and community-based intervention programs (Maynard et al., 2013), but even court-based interventions can still focus on some truant-specific risk factors. Furthermore, the length and duration of an intervention (a couple of hours or lasting a whole school year) did not seem to influence the results (Maynard et al., 2013). And although most interventions showed a positive effect on increasing the attendance of students, at the post-test the absence of the students was often still too high (Maynard et al., 2013). So, the review of Maynard et al. (2013) seems to support that serious or persistent absence from school is a wicked problem, which means that it is very difficult to produce effective interventions and to solve the problem completely. However as they point out themselves, their review is based only on a limited number of interventions and therefore further research into the effectiveness of interventions aimed at serious or persistent absentees is necessary to draw more certain and final conclusions (Maynard et al., 2013).

### **2.6.2 Reviewing the evidence on different responses to serious or persistent absence from school**

As mentioned before, there is a lack of evaluative research into the effectiveness of different interventions aimed at serious or persistent absence from school. Sutphen et al. (2010) conducted a systematic literature review of all peer-reviewed evaluative studies into truancy interventions between 1990 and 2007. Their most important finding was probably that they could only find 16 evaluative studies into truancy interventions to include, and they considered many of these evaluative studies methodologically weak. This clearly indicates a need for more good qualitative evaluative research into interventions aimed to reduce truancy. Nevertheless, there is still a considerable amount of research studies that mention some promising or working elements in interventions aimed at the prevention or reduction of serious or persistent absence from school. For instance, numerous research studies have pointed out that encouraging good communication and involvement of parents with school is seen as a key factor for successful intervention to reduce absenteeism (De Baat & Messing, 2012; Bryant, Shdaimah, Sander & Cornelius, 2013; Dembo et al., 2012; Gotfried, 2009; Sheldon, 2007). Especially early notification of parents when a student is absent seems beneficial (Sutphen et al., 2010). These studies indicate, therefore that intervening within the home-school mesosystem (See Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory, Chapter 1 Figure 3) might lead to positive outcomes.

Interventions that focus solely on punishing the student (for example by suspension) are not likely to have a positive effect, because interventions need to address the roots of the problem (Dembo et al., 2012; Flannery et al., 2012). Likewise policies that try to punish parents for the absence of their child by financial disincentives are not effective and are likely to increase the financial problems that are often already present within these families (Cantillon & Van Lancker, 2012). In contrast the use of positive contingency management, which means rewarding students for good behaviour (in this case good school attendance), and negative contingency management, which means a negative response to bad behaviour (in this case not attending school) can be effective in reducing truancy in high school (Sutphen et al., 2010). An example of positive contingency management that seems to reduce truancy is the use of token economies (Sutphen et al., 2010). The use of contingency management and token economies is, however, not without debate. Age of the children seems to be a decisive factor for the success of the use of token economies. Soares, Harrison, Vannest and McClelland (2016) point out, based on a metareview of studies evaluating the effectiveness of token economies, that token economies are more effective for children between 6 and 15 year old than for children between 3 and 5 years old. In addition, Costello and Smyth (2017) indicate that the use of contingency management in the form of an interactive fantasy football game could be effective, because the 10 male at-risk adolescents

participating in their pilot study improved their school attendance. However, this was only a pilot study, so future research should establish the effectiveness on a larger scale. Yet, these studies suggest that the use of contingency management and token economies could be effective to reduce serious or persistent absence from school among adolescents.

### **2.6.3 Specific interventions aimed at reducing serious or persistent absence from school**

There are numerous court-based interventions that specifically focus on reducing serious or persistent absence from school, some school-based programs and quite a lot of interventions that seem to concentrate on improving the communication between the home and the school environment. These intervention programs try to bring about change at the mesosystem level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. Most research studies discussed in this section examine how effective specific programs were in reducing absence from school. However, some interventions might be directed at improving other outcomes as well, such as graduation levels and finding employment.

#### *School-based interventions*

Most schools in both England and the Netherlands have policies on how to respond to students who are at risk of or already displaying attendance problems. When students are absent from school without authorisation from their parents or the school, they may, for example, be punished by having to stay longer at school or attend school earlier the next day and perform some tasks (such as emptying garbage bins or watering plants). On the other hand, especially when the unauthorised absence seems to progress, most schools offer support from the mentor or pastoral care to these students. In addition, some young people in England are placed on a reduced timetable at school. Reid (2012) advocates, in his paper written based on over forty years of experience in the field of absence from school, the use of reduced timetables. He suggests that a reduced timetable can be especially beneficial to reduce specific-day absence, which is absence from school because a young person wants to avoid certain lessons (for example: physical education). Lloyd, Stead and Kendrick (2003), however, do indicate that the use of a reduced timetable does mean that a student is not fully included into the school or the curriculum anymore. This means that there can also be downsides to the use of reduced timetables.

Although these are all measures schools take in the hope to improve attendance, these are often part of a broad set of measures a school can take and described in the school policy. There is not much research conducted into how effective each of these specific measures is in reducing serious or persistent absence from school. Many of the reviewed specific intervention programs (i.e. programs that are designed and implemented for a group of students at a school to prevent or



reduce truancy or serious or persistent absence from school) implemented (partly) at school, not only address in-school factors but also involve the parents of the young person. These interventions will, therefore, be discussed in the home-school mesosystem section.

The regular school curriculum can be challenging for young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), which might affect their school attendance. In England, students with SEBD often have a Special Educational Need (SEN) statement; the DFE (2017) indicates that the persistent absence rate of students with a SEN statement is almost three times higher (22.6 per cent) than that of students without SEN. Price (2015), therefore, evaluated the effectiveness of a one year outdoor learning programme that ran on a special school in England. Participating students attended the outdoor learning programme one day a week and had to attend regular lessons on the other days. The young people enjoyed the outdoor learning programme which improved their attendance, punctuality and behaviour on the days that the programme ran. However, it was unclear whether attendance at other days improved as well. But as Price (2015) points out offering alternative learning programmes looks promising, because even if attendance at first only gets better for the alternative activity, this might still be an opening towards changing attitudes to school. In the Netherlands, young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are not distinguished as a separate group of students, and therefore the influence of these difficulties on serious or persistent absence from school is not known in the Netherlands.

#### *Intervention programs targeting the home-school mesosystem*

Many intervention programmes with the goal to reduce absence through improving the communication and relation between parents and school focus on children at primary schools. This seems a good approach, because McConnell and Kubina (2014) conclude after a metareview of seven studies that when parents become more involved with school attendance when the child is still young this will help them to promote the attendance of their child throughout the school career of the young person.

McCluskey, Bynum & Patchin (2004) evaluated an intervention programme in which parents of elementary school children received a letter as soon as the absence of their child was too high, informing them of the compulsory character of attending school and the possible consequences for them. Two weeks after sending the letter, the attendance of the child was evaluated again. When attendance had improved parents received a congratulatory letter, but when there was no improvement the school attendance officer would visit the family at home. If this visit did not create a positive change, the case was referred to social services. Finally, the attendance officer could make another visit to the family accompanied by a police officer. Only, if all these steps did not create a positive change in the school attendance, the case would be referred

to court. Particularly sending the letter and the visit of the attendance officer were very effective in reducing absence at primary school. These are both measures that can be implemented at a relatively low cost, provided that an attendance officer is already working at the school. Sutphen et al. (2010) point out that the presence of an attendance officer at primary school is effective in reducing absence.

Cook, Dodge, Gifford and Schulting (2017) also suggest that involving the family at an early stage when absence becomes a problem has a positive impact on reducing absence levels. However, they argue that it is more effective when the class teacher takes the leading role in the intervention. They evaluated the Early Truancy Prevention Project (ETPP) which aims to reduce absence at primary school by improving communication between parents and teachers. A crucial part of this programme is a home visit made by the teacher to every child in the class. Their evaluation indicated a positive effect of the ETPP on reducing frequent absences from school. According to Cook et al. (2017) using the classroom teacher as the primary change agent is the key for the success of the programme, but they do acknowledge that a more extensive evaluation of the programme is needed. Furthermore, the programme they evaluated was used in primary schools and the possible effect of the programme in secondary school therefore remains unknown (Cook et al., 2017).

The final intervention discussed in this section focuses on Dutch secondary schools. Cabus and De Witte (2015b) evaluated a pilot which was called 'bewust aanwezig op school' ('increased awareness for school attendance'). The aim of this intervention programme is to reduce school dropout, but that is to be achieved with a focus on absence from school. There are many agencies involved in this intervention. A professional mentor or social worker will have a personal meeting with every truant. This might be followed up by a 3-hour home visit of a social worker, who will speak with both the parents and the young person about the importance of education. In addition, as part of the programme teachers are made more aware of the importance of dropout prevention, for example through information sessions about the importance of attendance registration and care for at risk students held by education welfare officers. The final component of the programme is a regular meeting at school attended by school management, teachers, mentors, social workers and education welfare officers. Furthermore, an information campaign about the intervention was held to warn potential truants about the consequences of their behaviour. So, the intervention had preventive and curative components. Initial results showed a clear reduction in dropout shortly after the implementation of the intervention. The reduction in school dropout was greatest in the lowest educational track (See Chapter 3 for more information on the Dutch tracked school system), but was visible in all tracks. So, an active approach in which students at risk of school dropout (due

to their serious or persistent absence from school) are targeted seems to be effective in reducing early school leaving (Cabus & De Witte, 2015b).

All these interventions try to improve school attendance through increasing family involvement with the school attendance of the young person. However, in both the programme evaluated by McCluskey et al. (2004) and Cabus and De Witte (2015b) it was not the teacher but a social worker or the school attendance officer who was making the home visit. It is interesting that these interventions seemed to have a positive effect as well, because McConnell & Bukina (2014) suggest based on their literature review of seven studies that mainly increasing the direct contact between the teacher and parents seems beneficial to reduce absence from school. However, all the in this section discussed intervention programmes have in common that they emphasise informing the family as soon as the problematic absence from school starts. It might, therefore, be that this contact between school and family at an early stage (before the absence problems have progressed) is the working element. Finally, it should be noted that the focus in many of these programmes is on the family, but that all of these programmes do include the school as well. Sometimes only by making sure there is an attendance officer present at school and in other cases more extensively, but there are no interventions aimed at reducing serious or persistent absence from school that solely focus on the family.

#### *Court-based intervention programs*

Many evaluated intervention programmes are American. This is a consequence of the lack of evaluative research on serious or persistent absence interventions carried out in European countries. Yet, Van Burik et al. (2007) conducted an evaluative study into the effectiveness of court-based interventions in the Netherlands developed for children that are persistent absent from school. The evaluated interventions are 'ROOS', 'Basta', 'Ouders Present' and 'Jeugdreclassering'. Unfortunately, none of these interventions proved to be effective in reducing the school absence from the students. However, Van Burik et al. (2007) argue that this does not mean that the interventions create no effect at all, because the programmes also aim to help students in their development and parents in educating their children. Moreover, after the completion of the programs most participants were positive in their evaluation of the programme. The main reason for the failure of the programs to improve the school attendance of their participants is that they focus on one factor instead of creating a collaborative effort between family, school, community and the court to help the student (Van Burik et al., 2010).

In England, Zhang (2004) points out that prosecuting more parents does not lead to lower truancy rates, and does not tackle truancy in the long term. Therefore, solely relying on punishing parents in the response to truancy is not an effective way of responding to persistent absence from

school (Zhang, 2004). According to Zhang (2007) serious absence usually is the result of a circle of poverty and disadvantage. The prosecution of parents is based on the assumption that poor parenting is the main cause for persistent absence from school. However, these poor parenting practices arise from the circle of poverty and disadvantage. Because only punishing parents does not break this circle, the prosecution of parents will not be effective in tackling serious absence from school in the long run. Therefore, a good response to persistent absence would be to empower parents instead of punishing them (Zhang, 2007).

### *Summary*

The research evidence presented above indicates that many interventions that target serious or persistent absence from school do create some positive outcomes for the young person. More research is necessary, however, to establish which components of interventions are creating the most positive effects and which systems (of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, See Chapter 1 Figure 3) could best be targeted. What becomes clear, however, is that many interventions already focus on more than one microsystem and combine the expertise of professionals from different disciplines (such as teachers in school and social workers in the family). The combination of creating more awareness at schools and encouraging early reporting of absence to parents (especially already in primary school) with a home visit to discuss the importance of education seems to be promising. However, As Sutphen et al. (2010) point out based on their metareview, different research studies use different definitions, studies are often not replicated, and not many studies report effect sizes, which makes it hard to discover what works best in responding to or preventing serious or persistent absence from school. Although Maynard et al. (2013) concluded after reviewing 16 evaluative studies that many intervention programs do seem to create some positive effects, absence levels often remain high. This suggests that even successful interventions cannot solve the problem completely, which indicates that governments and policy makers might have to re-evaluate the goal of the intervention. They might need to aim for coping or taming the problem instead of solving it completely (Daviter 2017, See Chapter 1). In addition, governments and policy makers would benefit from more evaluative research into the effectiveness of different responses to serious or persistent absence from school.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This literature review has reiterated the complexity of serious or persistent absence from school by viewing the problem from different angles. Research evidence showed a clear connection between serious or persistent absence from school and juvenile offending behaviour. There also are many

similarities in risk factors between serious or persistent absentees and juvenile offenders, but absentees seem to experience more risk at all levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This suggests, that generally speaking serious or persistent absentees are more vulnerable than young offenders who are not serious or persistent absentees, which is in line with the findings of Van der Laan et al. (2009) who conducted research into the risk factors of Dutch juvenile offenders and Dutch serious or persistent absentees. However, more research is needed to establish differences and similarities between serious or persistent absentees and juvenile offenders. By discussing the level of vulnerability of serious or persistent absentees, it became apparent that this is a concept which can be defined in numerous ways, and scholars from different disciplines or even within the same discipline might have a different view on what constitutes vulnerability and who is responsible for the existence of vulnerability. In this thesis, the concept of vulnerability has been made dichotomous and the variable of 'being taken into care' was used to achieve this.

The variety of research from different disciplines into serious or persistent absence from school illustrates the complex nature of the problem. However, this does not necessarily mean that a complex and interdisciplinary response would be most effective. Maynard et al. (2013) indicate that the complexity of a multimodal intervention might lead to fewer positive effects compared to less complex interventions that focus on a single problem area. Daviter (2017) suggests, therefore, that not every wicked problem can be solved and policy makers could also adopt a taming or coping strategy in response to the problem instead. In a taming strategy, one organisation should be appointed to respond to the serious or persistent absence from school, whereas in the coping strategy different organisations could respond to the problem simultaneously, but without cooperating (Daviter, 2017 (See Chapter 1)). Consequently, adopting a taming or coping strategy in responding to serious or persistent absence from school could address the issues that Maynard et al. (2013) pointed out about the use of too complex multimodal interventions.

In addition to these findings, this review has also led to the identification of some gaps in the existing literature on serious or persistent absence from school. First of all, Kearny (2008a) indicates based on his extensive literature review on research studies about school absenteeism that cross-cultural studies find many similarities but also some factors that are specific to the culture of the research context. This suggests that cross-cultural research could further investigate which factors can explain differences and similarities between serious or persistent absentees in different countries. Yet, Kearny (2008a, p. 91) points out: 'In general, however, cross-cultural aspects of school absenteeism and school refusal behaviour remain in need of greater exploration and explication'. By comparing serious or persistent absence from school in England and the Netherlands this research project contributes to filling the gap of cross-cultural research studies on serious or persistent absence from school.

Secondly, this literature review has not uncovered any studies that specifically address the role that the level of vulnerability and the level of offending behaviour have on the characteristics and outcomes of serious or persistent absentees. There are some studies who have identified differences and similarities between juvenile offenders and serious or persistent absentees (See for example: Van der Woude et al., 2017; Van der Laan et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2007; Gavazzi et al., 2005). Yet, this study is comparing serious or persistent absentees who are also juvenile offenders with serious or persistent absentees who have not committed any offence. This literature review did not lead to any studies looking into the effect of the level of vulnerability on serious or persistent absence from school, although Van der Laan et al., (2009) do indicate that Dutch serious or persistent absentees experience more risk factors at different levels than Dutch juvenile offenders. Yet, the research thus far has not provided evidence on the impact different levels of vulnerability and offending behaviour have on serious or persistent absence from school and the outcomes for serious or persistent absentees. This study will, therefore, contribute to knowledge by exploring this impact.

Finally, the literature reviews into evaluative studies into the effectiveness of truancy intervention programs by Maynard et al. (2013) and Sutphen et al. (2010) both suggest that there is a lack of evaluative research. Moreover, most evaluative studies focus on an intervention program that is implemented at school or in the court, and this study will be the first to compare the overall response of the local authority to serious or persistent absence from school in two different countries. This evaluation of the response to serious or persistent absence from school in England and the Netherlands will, therefore, contribute to knowledge on the outcomes of different policies countries can adopt to respond to serious or persistent absence from school.

## **Chapter 3: Comparing England and the Netherlands**

### **3.1 Introduction**

As already set out in the first chapter, this research project adopts a comparative approach to review different responses to persistent or serious absence from school. In chapter 4, the chosen methodology, research design and the specific methods used in this research study will be discussed in more depth. Yet, this chapter will first give an overview of the differences and similarities between England and the Netherlands in different areas that might have an influence on the scope and nature of persistent or serious absence from school in both countries. This chapter, therefore, provides the context in which the persistent or serious absence from school occurs in England as well as the Netherlands. This means that in this chapter many variables operating at Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem level will be discussed (See Chapter 1 Figure 3). And whilst most of these factors will not directly impact on the serious or persistent absence from an individual absentee, they might have a role in the background that influences the onset or progression of absence from school.

Before this chapter moves to the description of the national contexts in England and the Netherlands, the choice for these two countries as the focus of the comparison will now be discussed. There are four reasons to choose England and the Netherlands. First and foremost, the comparison between England and the Netherlands is interesting because of the different focus of the response to serious or persistent absence from school; where in England only parents of serious or persistent absentees can be prosecuted, in the Netherlands (from the age of 12) the young person and/or the parents can be prosecuted. Comparing these two approaches, therefore, means that England and the Netherlands could maybe learn from each other. Since researching the possibility of policy transfer was one of the main aims of this research, choosing two countries with such a different policy regarding serious or persistent absence from school is vital. Secondly, whilst the policy of responding to serious or persistent absence from school is different, in other respects the countries are actually very similar (they are both Western European countries, democracies, welfare states and have a similar age of compulsory education). Teune (1990) points out that it is more likely that it is possible for countries to adopt policies from each other if they are similar, so the similarity supports the choice of comparing England and the Netherlands. Thirdly, section 1.6 of Chapter 1 indicates that both The Dutch and the English government are focusing on reducing serious or persistent absence from school in quite similar ways. Both countries have recently added a qualification requirement to the age of compulsory education and both countries adopt fairly punitive policies in response to serious or persistent absence from school. This means that it is a good time to research the effects of these policies on serious or persistent absentees and/or their

parents. Finally, there are some practical advantages of choosing England and the Netherlands. The main practical advantage is that the researcher speaks both languages. In addition, the researcher has lived in both countries and therefore has a basic understanding of how each of the countries operate. So, the choice to compare England and the Netherlands benefits the aims of the research, and means that the researcher is suitable to conduct the research.

In this chapter, for many variables not only the figure for England and the Netherlands will be discussed, but also for two cities Portsmouth (in England) and Rotterdam (in the Netherlands). These cities are mentioned, because the samples for this research were drawn from lists of serious or persistent absence cases in Portsmouth and Rotterdam (Chapter 4 shows the selection of the samples in more detail). The research used these two cities for a focused comparison, because it would be very hard to compare the overall approach of all local authorities in England and the Netherlands. The choice for Rotterdam was made because the research had already collected data of serious or persistent absence from school for a Masters thesis project (Chapter 4 will discuss how that research project has informed decisions for this research project). Thus after the selection of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, a similar city to conduct the research in was sought in England. Portsmouth was chosen, because both Portsmouth and Rotterdam have a sizeable working-class community, are ports and serious or persistent absence from school is in both cities a slightly larger problem compared to the respective national average. This means that Portsmouth and Rotterdam were deemed suitable as case studies for the comparison of (the response to) serious or persistent absence from school in England and the Netherlands.

So, this chapter will provide more information about the contexts in which the serious or persistent absence occurs. Firstly, the scope of serious or persistent absence from school both in England and the Netherlands will be set out. Secondly, some demographic variables will be discussed. Thirdly, the development of both societies as welfare states will be discussed, as this impacts on who is seen as responsible for problems in society, who needs to respond to the problem, the amount of government involvement and the role that education plays in a society. Fourthly, international reports on the health and well-being of young people will be considered, focusing on the data for England and the Netherlands, as this is likely to impact both the scope and the nature of serious or persistent absence from school. Fifthly, by comparing the history of compulsory schooling, the education systems, and some specific options of education in both countries, the differences and similarities between the Dutch and English education setting will be examined. Sixthly, the operating of the care systems with respect to protecting vulnerable children in both countries will be set out. Finally, the options that distinct institutions in both societies have to respond to persistent absentees and/or their parents will be discussed in detail.



## 3.2 Scope of the problem

Absence from school is measured and registered differently in England and the Netherlands. This means that it might be difficult to compare the absence figures. Yet, this section will still provide an overview of the prevalence of serious or persistent absence from school in both countries and in the cities Portsmouth and Rotterdam.

### 3.2.1 Prevalence of serious or persistent absence in England and Portsmouth

Table 3 shows the absence figures for England and Portsmouth for the 2015/2016 academic year. The DFE (2017, p.4) indicates that 'the overall absence rate is the total number of overall absence sessions of all pupils as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions for all people'. The overall absence rate in England in 2015/16 (when this study concluded) was 4.6 percent. Students are counted as a persistent absentee when they miss 10 percent or more of their own possible sessions (DFE, 2017).

The figures clearly indicate that both overall absence and persistent absence from school is more common among all school types in Portsmouth compared to the national average (See Table 3). Especially, the 42.1 percent persistent absentees among students who attend special schools in Portsmouth seems worrying. The Portsmouth Education Partnership (n.d.) further indicates that whilst there were 12.8 percent persistent absentees in the 2015/2016 academic year in Portsmouth, 1.14 percent were chronic absentees. Chronic absentees missed over 50 percent of the possible sessions they could attend.

**Table 3. Absence and persistent absence in England and Portsmouth in 2015/2016 (figures in this table are based on Government UK (2017)).**

	England		Portsmouth	
	Overall absence (%)	Enrolments who are persistent absentees (%)	Overall absence (%)	Enrolments who are persistent absentees (%)
State-funded primary schools	4.0	8.2	4.1	8.8
State-funded secondary schools	5.2	13.1	6.2	17.7
Special schools	9.1	26.9	16.5	42.1
<b>All Schools</b>	4.6	10.5	5.1	12.8

Many serious or persistent absentees are sent to pupil referral units (PRU's) for various reasons. The goal of these units is to guide students back to (mainstream) education. However, the national figures indicate that attendance at PRU's is even worse than at special schools. The overall absence rate at PRU's for the academic year 2015/2016 is 32.6 percent, and 72.5 percent of the enrolments

at PRU's was persistently absent from school (DFE, 2017). The DFE (2017) does not specify the absence rates in PRU's for the different local authorities, so the absence rate in PRU's in Portsmouth is unclear. Yet, the national figures and the absence levels in special schools in Portsmouth (See Table 3) indicate that young people who are not in mainstream education are more likely to become serious or persistent absentees.

The DFE (2017) further specifies the sessions of absence by reason: 89 percent of pupils missed at least one session authorised, whereas 38.6 percent of all pupils had at least one session of unauthorised absence. The biggest group of unauthorised absences were 'other unauthorised circumstances' (23.6%), followed by 'family holiday not agreed' (11.9%; this is called luxury absence in the Netherlands, See Chapter 1), 'arrived late' (7.8%) and 'no reason yet' (6.0%) (DFE, 2017). This suggests that although a fair amount of unauthorised absences in England are because of term-time holidays, there is also a considerable amount of unauthorised absences that would be called 'signal absence' in the Netherlands (See Chapter 1).

The figures of the DFE (2017) also show the absence rates for different ethnic groups in England. Overall absence is highest for travellers from Irish heritage (17.9%). The Gypsy/Roma's also have very high rates of overall absence (12.7%). To the contrary, some ethnic groups have overall absence levels that are well below the national average of 4.6 percent. For example, for the Chinese the overall absence is only 2.4 percent, and 3.0 percent for Black Africans.

A last factor to consider is the influence of poverty and living circumstances on absence and persistent absenteeism. Overall absence among children who are eligible for free school meals, which is a strong poverty indicator, is much higher than for children not eligible for free school meals (7.0% compared to 4.1%). Pupils eligible for free school meals are also more often persistent absentee (21.6% compared to 8.2%). Furthermore, both the level of overall absence (5.5% versus 3.4%) and the number of persistent absentees (15.3% versus 5.3%) is much higher in the most deprived areas than in the least deprived areas (DFE, 2017). Therefore, both poverty and living in a deprived area seem to contribute to absence from school.

### **3.2.2 Prevalence of serious or persistent absence in The Netherlands and Rotterdam**

In the Netherlands and Rotterdam, absence from school is measured and registered differently than in England and Portsmouth. Table 4, therefore, shows the national absence figures and the figures for Rotterdam for the year 2015/2016 based on the terms and definitions used in the Netherlands. The biggest difference in how absence from school is measured and registered in England and the Netherlands is that the Dutch government mainly uses absolute numbers (and no percentages), whereas the English government uses percentages in addition to absolute numbers. Absolute figures are, however, difficult to compare because the size of the school-aged population is

different in both countries and cities. To make the figures more comparable, the researcher did calculate the percentages for the Netherlands based on the absolute absence figures and the total school population. Young people who were 16 years or older and already obtained a start qualification (this will be explained later in this chapter) are not included in the total school population, because education is not compulsory anymore for them. Relative absentees are students of school age who are unauthorised absent from school for 16 hours or more in a 4-week period (Staatssecretaris van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2016). Chronic relative absentees are young people who are registered at a school but have been unauthorised absent for a period of four weeks or longer (Staatssecretaris van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2016). The 308 chronic relative absentees in Rotterdam in the year 2015/2016 were on average 'sitting at home' for 19 weeks before they attended a school again (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2016). Early school leavers are young people who drop out of school before they have obtained a qualification.

The figures show that apart from absolute absence, all types of absence from school are more common in Rotterdam than in the Netherlands as a whole. The relative absence from school and the proportion of young people that are reported to the prosecution service due to their absence from school is especially much larger in Rotterdam. This indicates that serious or persistent absence from school is a bigger issue in Rotterdam compared to the national average, since only cases in which the absence from school is serious or persistent will be reported to the prosecution service.

**Table 4. School absence figures for the Netherlands and Rotterdam (figures in this table are based on: Ingrado vsv Kompas (n.d.) and gemeente Rotterdam (2016)).**

	The Netherlands		Rotterdam	
	Number	%	Number	%
Absolute absence	5101	0.20	108	0.14
Relative absence	68262	2.69	9343	12.22
Luxury absence		0.19		0.76
Chronic relative absence (before: 'sitting at home')	4287	0.17	308	0.40
Early school leavers		1.80		3.10
Exemption from compulsory education	15998	0.63	592	0.77
Reports to the prosecution service	6461	0.25	672	0.88
<b>Total School population (5-18)</b>	<b>2539727</b>		<b>76446</b>	

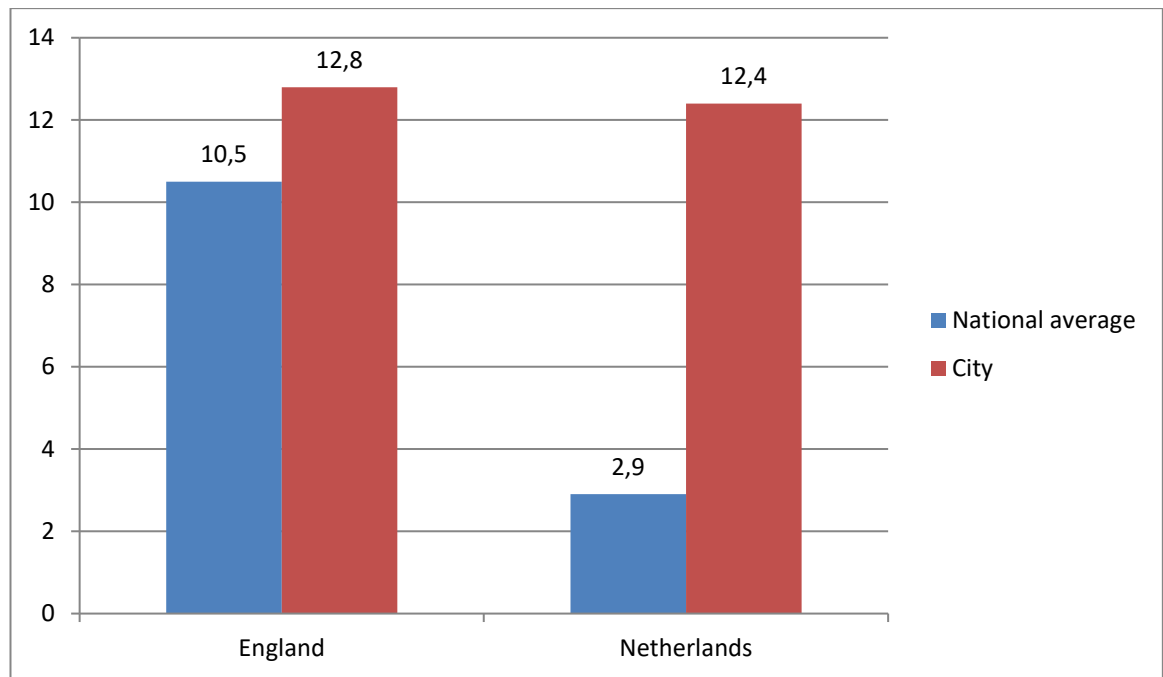
### 3.2.3 Comparing the scope of absence from school in England and the Netherlands

The different terms and definitions used in Table 3 and Table 4 make it difficult to compare the prevalence of serious or persistent absence from school in both countries. The overall absence levels in England and Portsmouth are calculated based on the total number of sessions the whole

school population should have attended and the amount of sessions that students were absent. This means that it is not a percentage of how many individual students were absent, but an overview of the overall prevalence of absence from school. Furthermore, this includes both authorised and unauthorised absences, whereas in the Netherlands only unauthorised absences are counted towards the absence figures.

The percentage of persistent absentees, on the other hand, does give an indication of how many individual students are persistently absent in England and Portsmouth. These figures are, therefore, more useful for a comparison with the Dutch data. Whilst the term 'persistent absentee' is not used in the Netherlands, both absolute absentees (not registered at a school at all) and relative absentees (missing more than 16 school hours in four weeks) can be viewed as persistent absentees. Chronic persistent absentees did not attend school at all for four weeks or more, but they are also included in the relative absence percentage. Early school leavers are drop-outs who do not attend school at all anymore. Serious or persistent absence from school often leads to early school leaving (Teijl , 2006), but the early school leavers will not be counted towards the serious or persistent absence percentage. There are three different grounds for an exemption of compulsory schooling in the Netherlands (which will be addressed later in this chapter). Yet, since these students are legally not attending school they will not be counted towards the persistent absence percentage.

So, by adding up the percentage of absolute and relative absentees in the Netherlands and Rotterdam (See Table 4), the percentage of persistent absence from school can be calculated for the Netherlands. Figure 5 indicates that the national percentage of persistent absentees is higher in England compared to the Netherlands, although the definitions of persistent absence from school are different. Whilst the percentage of persistent absentees for both cities (Portsmouth and Rotterdam) is fairly similar and above the respective national average, Rotterdam has more than four times more absentees than the Dutch national average (See Figure 5). This means that the level of persistent absence from school in Portsmouth is closer to the English national average than the level in Rotterdam is to the Dutch average.



**Figure 5: The percentage of persistent absentees in England, the Netherlands, Portsmouth and Rotterdam.**

### 3.3 Demographic variables

Table 3.3 shows population figures for England (excluding Wales and other parts of the United Kingdom) and the Netherlands, and also for Rotterdam and Portsmouth, because those cities are the case studies for this research. It shows that the English population is about three times the size of the Dutch. However, the age structure of the population is quite similar in both countries. Both in England and the Netherlands around 20 percent of the population is younger than 18, and around 18 percent of the population is over 65. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) indicates that in both countries the proportion of the population that is under 15 is decreasing in recent years, while an increasing part of the population is above 65 (OECD, 2012a; OECD;2012b). Rotterdam is a larger city than Portsmouth. Rotterdam's population is almost three times the size of the population of Portsmouth. Yet, in both cities the percentage of youth is similar to the national youth percentage, and the elderly population in both cities is below the national average. So, while both cities differ in size, the structure of their population compared to the national structure of the population is very similar (See Table 5).

**Table 5. Demographic variables for the Netherlands (January 2017) and England (Mid-2016)**

	<b>Netherlands<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Rotterdam</b>	<b>England<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Portsmouth</b>
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>17081507</b>	<b>634660</b>	<b>55268067</b>	<b>214832</b>
<b>Youth population (under 18)</b>	<b>3404098</b>	<b>123032</b>	<b>11785277</b>	<b>44000</b>
Percentage of total population	19.93%	19.39%	21.32%	20.48%
<b>Elderly population (over 65)</b>	<b>3159660</b>	<b>96045</b>	<b>9882841</b>	<b>29909</b>
Percentage of total population	18.50%	15.13%	17.88%	13.92%

<sup>1</sup> The figures for the Netherlands and Rotterdam are produced by the statline database of the Centraal Bureau voor Statistiek (CBS), (CBS, n.d.a)

<sup>2</sup> The figures for England and Portsmouth are estimates produced by the office for national statistics found on the website of the Hampshire County Council (Hampshire County Council, n.d.).

### **3.3.1 Comparing the English and Dutch ethnicity figures**

Tables 6 and 7 show the ethnicity figures for England/Portsmouth and the Netherlands/Rotterdam respectively. It becomes apparent, that in both countries different ethnic groups are distinguished when ethnicity figures are reported. This is partly because different ethnicity groups are large in the Netherlands compared to England. For example, more Moroccan and Turkish people are living in the Netherlands compared to England, but in England live more people with an Asian ethnicity. There is, however, also a difference in how ethnicity is registered. In England, the office for national statistics distinguishes for example between white and black groups, while the Dutch CBS distinguishes Western and non-Western ethnic groups. The subcategories distinguished in the Netherlands are not mutually exclusive (e.g. European Union and Belgium), therefore Table 7 shows no percentages for the subcategories. The different way of reporting ethnicity makes it difficult to compare the figures. Yet, it still shows some interesting similarities and differences between the two countries. The proportion of people in England that are white and from the United Kingdom (79.8%, See Table 6) is similar, but slightly higher, to the proportion of Dutch people in the Netherlands (77.39%, See Table 7). So, in both countries live a similar amount of people with a different ethnicity than the majority ethnic group. Yet, it looks as if the Netherlands has more individuals with a Western ethnicity compared to England.

The ethnic structure of the population in Portsmouth and Rotterdam, however, is fairly different even if you compare it to the respective national ethnicity division. Whilst Portsmouth has a higher percentage of white people (88.4%) than the total of England (85.4%), a much lower percentage of Dutch people (49.68%) lives in Rotterdam than in the Netherlands (77.39%) (See Tables 6 and 7). There are both more individuals with a Western and more individuals with a Non-

Western ethnicity living in Rotterdam, but the biggest difference with the national population are the number of people with a Non-Western ethnicity. If certain ethnic groups of people are more likely to become serious or persistent absentees, the differences between Portsmouth and Rotterdam might impact on the findings. The previous section indicated that persistent absence from school was a larger problem in Portsmouth compared to nationally and that absence figures among Chinese and Black Africans pupils were very low. Table 6 indicates that there are proportionally more Chinese people living in Portsmouth and slightly fewer black Africans, but this does not seem to have had a big impact on the absence figures for Portsmouth.

**Table 6. Ethnicity figures for England and Portsmouth based on the census 2011 data**

	England <sup>1</sup>		Portsmouth <sup>2</sup>	
	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Total population</b>	<b>53012456</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>205056</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>White</b>	<b>45281142</b>	<b>85.4</b>	<b>181182</b>	<b>88.4</b>
English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	42279236	79.8	172313	84.0
Irish	517001	1.0	1071	0.5
Gypsy or Irish Traveller	54895	0.1	85	0.0
Other White	2430010	4.6	7713	3.8
<b>Mixed/multiple ethnic groups</b>	<b>1192879</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>5467</b>	<b>2.7</b>
White and Black Caribbean	415616	0.8	1103	0.5
White and Black African	161550	0.3	935	0.5
White and Asian	332708	0.6	2381	1.2
Other Mixed	283005	0.5	1048	0.5
<b>Asian/Asian British</b>	<b>4143403</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>12474</b>	<b>6.1</b>
Indian	1395702	2.6	2911	1.4
Pakistani	1112282	2.1	539	0.3
Bangladeshi	436514	0.8	3649	1.8
Chinese	379503	0.7	2611	1.3
Other Asian	819402	1.5	2764	1.3
<b>Black/African/Caribbean/Black British</b>	<b>1846614</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>3777</b>	<b>1.8</b>
African	977741	1.8	2958	1.4
Caribbean	591016	1.1	540	0.3
Other Black	277857	0.5	279	0.1
<b>Other ethnic group</b>	<b>548418</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>2156</b>	<b>1.1</b>
Arab	220958	0.4	1078	0.5
Any other ethnic group	327433	0.6	1078	0.5

<sup>1</sup>The figures for England are estimates produced by the office for national statistics found on the Nomis website based on the 2011 census (Nomis, n.d.a).

<sup>2</sup>The figures for Portsmouth are estimates produced by the office for national statistics found on the Nomis website based on the 2011 census (Nomis, n.d.b).



**Table 7. Ethnicity figures for the Netherlands and Rotterdam for 1 January 2017<sup>1</sup>**

	The Netherlands		Rotterdam	
	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Total population</b>	<b>17081507</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>634660</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Dutch</b>	<b>13218754</b>	<b>77.39</b>	<b>315300</b>	<b>49.68</b>
<b>Western Migrants Total</b>	<b>1689030</b>	<b>9.89</b>	<b>78789</b>	<b>12.41</b>
European Union	1061721		49213	
Belgium	117495		3328	
Germany	356875		9580	
Indonesia	364328		12124	
<b>Non-Western Migrants Total</b>	<b>2173723</b>	<b>12.73</b>	<b>240571</b>	<b>37.91</b>
Morocco	391088		43555	
Former Dutch Antilles	153469		24475	
Suriname	349978		52579	
Turkey	400367		47772	

<sup>1</sup>The figures in this table are produced by the statline database of the CBS (CBS, n.d.b)

### **3.4 The impact of the type of welfare state on the health and well-being of young people in England and the Netherlands**

This section will start by describing the type of welfare state for both the Netherlands and England as this can be seen as macrosystem influences on serious or persistent absence from school. The organisation of a state, after all, is of influence on a variety of factors: it determines in which way and to what extent families are supported by the state, it impacts on the level of inequality in society, it sets a framework for the nature of the education system (which will be discussed in more detail in the next section), and it has an impact on the response to serious or persistent absence from school (which will be discussed later in this chapter). It can be expected, that differences in the type of welfare state lead to different levels of health and well-being among young people in both countries. The second part of this section, will therefore use data from large international comparative research into different factors impacting on the health and well-being of young people in England and the Netherlands.

#### **3.4.1 Types of welfare state**

Both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands are seen as welfare states, although as Esping-Andersen (1990) points out different types of welfare state exist. He distinguishes the liberal welfare state, the corporatist welfare state and the social-democratic welfare state. The liberal welfare state stimulates the market to create a good welfare system. Only poor and mostly working-class people qualify for benefits and the benefits are usually low, because going to work must pay.

The corporatist welfare state is conservative and tries to preserve the different classes; the class you are in determines the rights you have. Finally, the social-democratic welfare state aims to create high standards for all. In contrast to the other systems, the social-democratic welfare state desires equality of the highest standards (Esping-Anderson, 1990).

Contemporary England can be categorised as a liberal welfare state, although the typical examples of this system are the United States, Canada and Australia (Esping-Andersen 1990). Goodin, Heady, Muffels and Dirven (2000) classify the Netherlands as a social-democratic welfare state, although they acknowledge that Sweden is a more typical example of this type. However, Soede, Vrooman, Ferraresi and Segre (2004) argue that the Netherlands is a hybrid state, with some characteristics of the corporatist welfare states (which they call continental) and some of the social-democratic welfare state (which they call Nordic). This difference in classification of the Netherlands shows that it is not always straightforward to cluster a welfare state into a specific type. Moreover, that welfare states cluster does not mean that a state of one type cannot have some elements or characteristics of another type (Esping-Anderson, 1990). Hence, it is better to describe England as a predominantly liberal welfare state and the Netherlands as a predominantly social-democratic welfare state with clear characteristics of the corporatist welfare state as well. The type of welfare state influences the level of income inequality and poverty in a country (Soede et al., 2004). Therefore, the next section will discuss the level of income inequality and poverty for the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

### **3.4.2 Poverty and inequality**

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) provides figures about the level of income (in)equality and poverty in many countries. The OECD provides these figures both for the United Kingdom and for the Netherlands. Because a high level of income inequality and poverty have both been linked to serious or persistent absence from school (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Egger et al., 2003; Kearny 2008b, Veenstra et al., 2010), the OECD figures for the two countries on these variables will now be compared. The OECD (2019a) uses the Gini coefficient to compare the level of income inequality of different countries. A Gini coefficient of 0 means total equality and a coefficient of 1 means total inequality. In 2016, the Slovak Republic had the lowest level of income inequality with a Gini coefficient of 0.24, and South Africa the highest level with a Gini coefficient of 0.62. The level of income inequality in the Netherlands in 2016 (Gini coefficient 0.28) was lower than in the United Kingdom (Gini coefficient 0.35) (OECD, 2019a).

The OECD (2019b) also provide the poverty rates for different countries. They also specify the child poverty rate (for 0-17 year olds), which is of specific interest for the association of poverty and the onset of serious or persistent absence from school. The total poverty rate for the

Netherlands in 2016 was 0.083. However, the child poverty rate was with 0.109 higher than the total rate in the Netherlands. Both the total poverty rate (0.111) and the child poverty rate (0.118) were higher in the United Kingdom in 2016 compared to the Netherlands (OECD, 2019b). Yet, the difference between the child poverty rate and the total poverty rate was larger in the Netherlands. There is not a big difference in the level of child poverty between England and the Netherlands.

### **3.4.3 The health and wellbeing of young people**

The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2016) has published a report which shows the results of a survey into the health and well-being of young people in 44 countries and regions across Europe and North America in 2013/2014. Both English and Dutch children were included in the survey, and Table 8 summarises the results for these two countries on different categories.

In all age groups a larger percentage of Dutch children reports high life satisfaction compared with English children. Probably a variety of factors is of influence on the life satisfaction, therefore it is difficult to find one specific reason for the difference between England and the Netherlands. The higher life satisfaction rates, however, might mean that Dutch students are less likely to become a serious or persistent absentee than the English students.

Children attend school 5 days a week. Therefore, school plays an important role in their lives. This means that it is of concern that both in England and the Netherlands, at age 15 not even one in three children likes going to school a lot. This might indicate that the education system in both countries does not meet the needs of all children. More than half of the English children age 15 feel pressured by schoolwork. This suggests that the majority of English children do not experience attending school positively at the age of 15. In the Netherlands far fewer children feel pressured by schoolwork and more children do believe their classmates are kind and helpful. At the age of 11, more Dutch students report perceived good school performance, but once the young people have made the transition to secondary school (so at age 13 and 15) more English students report perceived good school performance. This might be caused by the tracked education system in the Netherlands (this will be explained further in section 3.5 about the Dutch and English education systems).

Table 9 shows the performances of 15 year old students in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands in reading, mathematics and science compared to the OECD average in 2015. The results of the PISA study show that Dutch children on average perform better in reading and mathematics than children in the United Kingdom (See Table 9). The Netherlands scores in every domain significantly above the OECD average. Students from the United Kingdom perform only significantly better in science and reading than the OECD average, but not in mathematics (OECD,

2016). Therefore, both the school climate and school performance seem to be better in the Netherlands than in the United Kingdom.

Both in England and the Netherlands more girls than boys rate their health as fair or poor and more girls report to have health complaints more than once a week (See Table 8). A larger percentage of English youth are overweight or obese compared to Dutch youth. However, more Dutch boys and girls think they are too fat. A possible explanation for this might be that the discourse on ideal or normal weight is different in both countries.

Despite numerous initiatives in England to stimulate children to eat a healthy breakfast before they go to school, a large proportion of the English youth do not have breakfast on a daily basis. Of the countries included in the WHO 2013/2014 survey, the Netherlands has the largest proportion of youth that eats breakfast daily. However, the Dutch youth are not ranked high for eating fruit daily and both the Dutch and the English youth have a large soft drink consumption (WHO, 2016).

More Dutch children (aged 15) drink alcohol once a week. However, drunkenness at a young age seems to be much more prevalent among English teens than among Dutch teens. In contrast, smoking at the age of 13 is slightly more prevalent under Dutch youth. About the same proportion of 15-year olds is using cannabis in both countries. Whereas the same proportion of youth in both countries uses condoms during sexual intercourse, more Dutch children use the contraceptive pill. This might partly explain the high prevalence of teen pregnancies (15%) in Great Britain (Darroch, Sing & Frost, 2001).

There seem to be no big differences in the prevalence of bullying and fighting behaviours in both countries. A slightly higher percentage of English youth report having been bullied. In this respect it is surprising that more Dutch children admit to bullying other children (See Table 8).

**Table 8. Reported health and well-being of young people in England and the Netherlands in 2013/2014 (WHO, 2016)<sup>1</sup>**

	11-year-olds				13-year-olds				15-year-olds			
	Eng		NL		Eng		NL		Eng		NL	
	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B
<b>Life satisfaction</b>												
Report high life satisfaction	88	90	92	95	81	90	88	94	71	84	84	94
Feeling low more than once a week	6	8	8	10	9	21	10	17	14	33	7	21
<b>School</b>												
Like school a lot	50	48	51	42	26	25	40	36	16	22	25	25
Report good perceived school performance	85	74	83	81	76	70	66	61	79	69	57	58
Feel pressured by schoolwork	28	30	10	9	42	39	26	20	73	52	40	27
Classmates are kind and helpful	81	79	86	87	61	62	86	86	59	61	84	85
<b>Health</b>												
Rate health as fair or poor	10	9	12	7	20	14	16	9	22	17	24	14
Health complaints more than once a week	22	17	32	25	39	22	39	24	51	28	46	20
Overweight or obese	17	27	9	15	14	26	12	15	12	17	13	15
Think they are too fat	26	21	33	23	39	23	46	28	50	25	51	27
<b>Consumer behaviour</b>												
Breakfast every school day	74	83	90	92	51	71	78	87	48	64	71	81
Eat fruit daily	42	42	48	41	37	34	36	30	39	33	31	23
Drink soft drinks daily	9	11	17	16	15	16	27	27	13	18	29	39
<b>Smoking, Drinking, drugs and sex</b>												
Smoking at age 13 or younger									11	10	16	18
Smoke at least once a week	0	0	0	0	3	2	2	2	8	6	11	11
Drink alcohol at least once a week	1	2	1	1	3	5	1	3	10	12	13	18
Drunkness at age 13 or younger									10	9	4	4
Been drunk at least twice	0	1	0	0	6	5	2	2	31	25	16	17
Ever used cannabis									19	19	15	18
Used cannabis in last 30 days									8	9	8	9
Used cannabis age 13 or younger									3	5	3	4
Had sexual intercourse									23	18	16	15
Used condom at last sexual intercourse									57	62	65	78
Used contraceptive pill at last intercourse									33	32	66	60
<b>Bullying and fighting</b>												
Been bullied at least twice in past months	10	11	12	10	12	11	8	9	9	10	7	5
Have bullied at least twice in past months	1	4	2	5	2	4	4	6	1	5	3	6
Involved in fight three times last 12 months	5	17	3	15	6	13	3	11	4	11	4	9

<sup>1</sup> G = Girls B = Boys

**Table 9. 15 year old students' performance in reading, mathematics and science in 2015 (OECD, 2016)**

	Reading scale	Mathematics scale	Science scale
OECD average	493	490	493
United Kingdom	498	492	509
Netherlands	503	512	509

This section has shown that the Netherlands and England are different welfare states, and this seems to have also led to a difference in health and well-being among Dutch and English youth, which might impact on serious or persistent absence from school. In addition, Dutch students seem to do slightly better in school, which might be caused by the organisation of the education system in both countries. The next section will therefore discuss the nature of both education systems, and how this influences various other variables in each country which are related to absence from school.

### **3.5 The education system in England and the Netherlands**

In both England and the Netherlands there is a legal duty for children up to the age of 16 to attend school. In addition to this duty, children also have the right to be educated. So, the education system has to be suitable for all children so they can access their right to education and perform their duty to attend school. England has an Anglo-American education system, where the outcome of secondary school is mainly based on passing a set of final exams or not. Whereas the Dutch education system is a tracked system, in which secondary school outcomes can be a result of intra-secondary transitions (Tieben & Wolbers, 2010). This means that a student can change track during the secondary school period (this will be addressed in more detail later in this section). The section about the scope of the problem indicates that serious or persistent absence from school is prevalent in both countries. However, it is possible that the nature of the education system impacts upon the degree of serious or persistent absence from school. In this section the history of compulsory schooling in both countries will be described, and the construction of the English and the Dutch education system will be set out (focussing primarily on secondary schools). Finally, some other factors related to the nature of the education system, such as exclusion, home education, diversity of provision and social segregation, will be discussed.

#### **3.5.1 History of compulsory education age in England and the Netherlands**

In both England and the Netherlands compulsory education has existed for over 100 years. However, the introduction of compulsory education was not without struggle. In both countries objections by the public were present, mainly because the introduction of compulsory education for children affects the freedom of parents to decide what is best for their children (Van Veen, 2000). Table 10 shows that in England education was already compulsory for 5-10 year olds in 1880, while in the Netherlands compulsory education (for children age 6-12) was only introduced twenty years later. According to Dodde (2000) the necessity to make education compulsory was lacking for a long time in the Netherlands, because of the high level of literacy compared to other countries. For example, in 1800 the literacy level in the Netherlands was 68 percent compared to 53 percent in England. By 1900, England had overtaken the Netherlands with a literacy level of 90 percent

compared to 87 percent (Dodde, 2000). This was a result of the earlier introduction of compulsory education in England.

However, Reid (1985) describes that with the introduction of compulsory education attendance rates were not immediately 100 percent in England. Even 40 years after the introduction of compulsory education, in urban areas the average attendance was just above 80 percent. The economic circumstances, the distance from the schools to the houses combined with limited transport opportunities and the unattractive school buildings caused low attendance rates (Reid, 1985). Nowadays these conditions are much better and attendance rates are higher. However, there is still a group of children that does not attend school regularly. Therefore, other factors might be impacting on absence from school this day and age.

After the first introduction of compulsory education, both countries increased the number of years for which education is compulsory several times (See Table 10). In England this is a more gradual route, while in the Netherlands in 1969 compulsory education was extended by four years (from 12 to 16) instantly. So, when looking at the exact age to which education is compulsory throughout the twentieth century there are some differences between the two countries, but the general trend is very similar in both countries: Namely, extending the age range for which education is compulsory. In recent years, however, the focus in both countries seems to shift from compulsory attendance up until a certain age towards a requirement to obtain a qualification.

In the Netherlands the 'kwalificatieplicht' (qualification requirement) was introduced in 2007. This implies that education is compulsory for pupils until they are 18 or have required a start-qualification (Eimers, Van Amelsvoort, Roelofs & Schuit, 2009). A 'hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs' (HAVO), 'voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs' (VWO) or 'middelbaar beroepsonderwijs' (MBO) level 2 qualification counts as a start-qualification (this will be explained in more detail in the section about the Dutch education system). The qualification requirement replaces the partially compulsory education for 17 year olds that was introduced in 1971. The goal of the qualification requirement is to reduce dropout rates and to improve the chances of youngsters on the labour market (Nieber, Paulssen & Van Zwieten, 2007). A year later, the Education and Skills Act 2008 introduced a very similar measure in England. It forces children who have ceased to be of compulsory school age, but are not yet 18 and have not attained a level 3 qualification to participate in education or training (art. 1 sub a,b,c Education and Skills Act 2008). This does not mean that all children under the age of 18 have to engage in full time education; as article 2 (Education and Skills act 2008) states it denotes that a person either has to participate in full time education or training, or has to participate in training in accordance with a contract of apprenticeship or is both in full time-occupation and participates in sufficient relevant training or education. Therefore, the compulsory school age in England is 16, but until a young person is 18

there is an obligation to participate in education or training as long as a level 3 qualification is not obtained. So, recently both in England and the Netherlands emphasis is placed on obtaining a qualification before leaving education. In both countries the age for leaving education is extended for those pupils who have not fulfilled the condition of acquiring a qualification. The new Dutch coalition government (installed in 2017) agreed to raise the qualification requirement even further until the age of 21 (VVD, CDA, D66 and Christenunie, 2017).

**Table 10. Legislation on compulsory education in England and the Netherlands**

English law			Dutch Law		
Year	Title / subject	Age	Year	Title / subject	Age
<b>Late 19<sup>th</sup> century</b>					
1870	Elementary Education Act		1848	First constitution freedom of education	
1880	Making education compulsory	5-10			
1893	Increasing compulsory education	5-11			
1899	Increasing compulsory education	5-13			
<b>Early 20<sup>th</sup> century</b>					
1918	Fisher Education Act	5-14	1900	Compulsory education law	6-12
1944	Education Act (effect in 1947)	5-15	1917	equal funding for public and private schools	
<b>Late 20<sup>th</sup> century</b>					
1972	Raising compulsory education	5-16	1969	Compulsory education law	6-16
			1971	Partial compulsory education for 17 year olds (at least one day in the week attending education)	17
			1985	Compulsory Education Law	5-16
<b>Early 21<sup>st</sup> century</b>					
2008	Education and Skills act		2007	Introduction 'kwalificatieplicht' (qualification requirement)	18
2013	Leaving learning	17			
2015	Leaving Learning	18			

### 3.5.2 The English education system

In England compulsory education starts in September after a child turned five and ends in June of the year a child turns 16. Figure 6 provides an overview of the education system in the United Kingdom (UK). The period of compulsory education is divided into four Key Stages. Key Stages 1 and 2 cover the primary school period and are for 5-11 year olds. Key stage 3 starts at the beginning of secondary school and is for 11-14 year olds. Key Stage 4 is for 14-16 year old children (Den Boer, Eimers & Visser, 2006). At the end of Key Stage 4 all students take part in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams. The Education and Skills act of 2008 raised the participation age to 18 years old. Therefore, after leaving secondary school students have to choose between academic education or vocational education. Students who choose the vocational track will follow a programme to obtain an National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) in a certain discipline (for



example, childcare). Students who choose the academic track go to a sixth form college to do A-levels, this usually takes 2 years. After this they can start at university (See Figure 6).

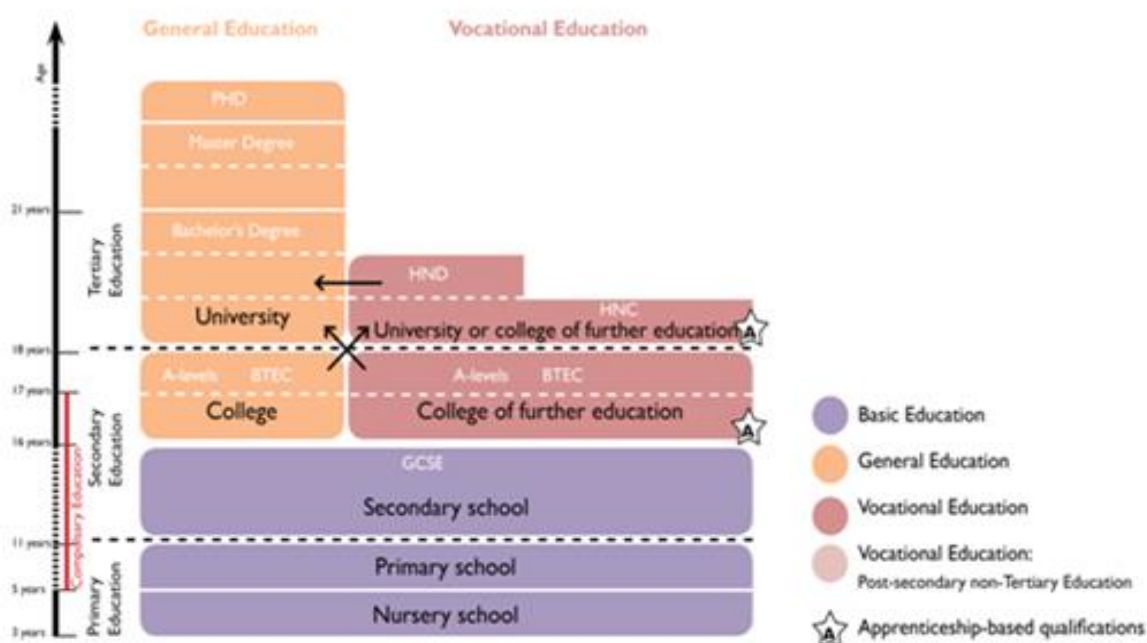


Figure 6: The UK education system (Onisep, n.d.a)

### 3.5.3 The Dutch education system

In the Netherlands, children generally start primary school on the day they turn 4 years old, but education is only compulsory from the age of 5. The young person attends eight years of primary school, after which the child will make the transition to secondary school. In secondary school, a child can participate in three different tracks. The first track is pre-vocational secondary education (called 'Voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs' (VMBO)), the second track is senior general secondary education (called HAVO) and the last track is pre-university secondary education (called VWO) (Den Boer et al., 2006) (See Figure 7). A national test in the last year of primary school and the advice of the primary school teacher are important for the allocation of the children to one of the different tracks in secondary school. Many children start with a combination of two tracks and after one or two years in secondary school make a decision (based on their results) to participate in one particular track. It is also common to make an intra-secondary transition in which a student changes tracks during the period of secondary schooling (Tieben & Wolbers, 2010).

Children have to go to school at the beginning of the month after the month they turned 5 years old. However, children are allowed to start school at the age of 4. Attending school is compulsory until a child turns 16 and has a start qualification. Without a start qualification the

compulsory school age is 18. Only HAVO, VWO or MBO level 2 degrees are counted as a start qualification. This means that students who have obtained a VMBO-degree (in the pre-vocational track) still have to attend a vocational education course afterwards (at least until they are 18 years old), and the new Dutch government intends to raise this age to 21 years old (VVD, CDA, D66 and Christenunie, 2017).

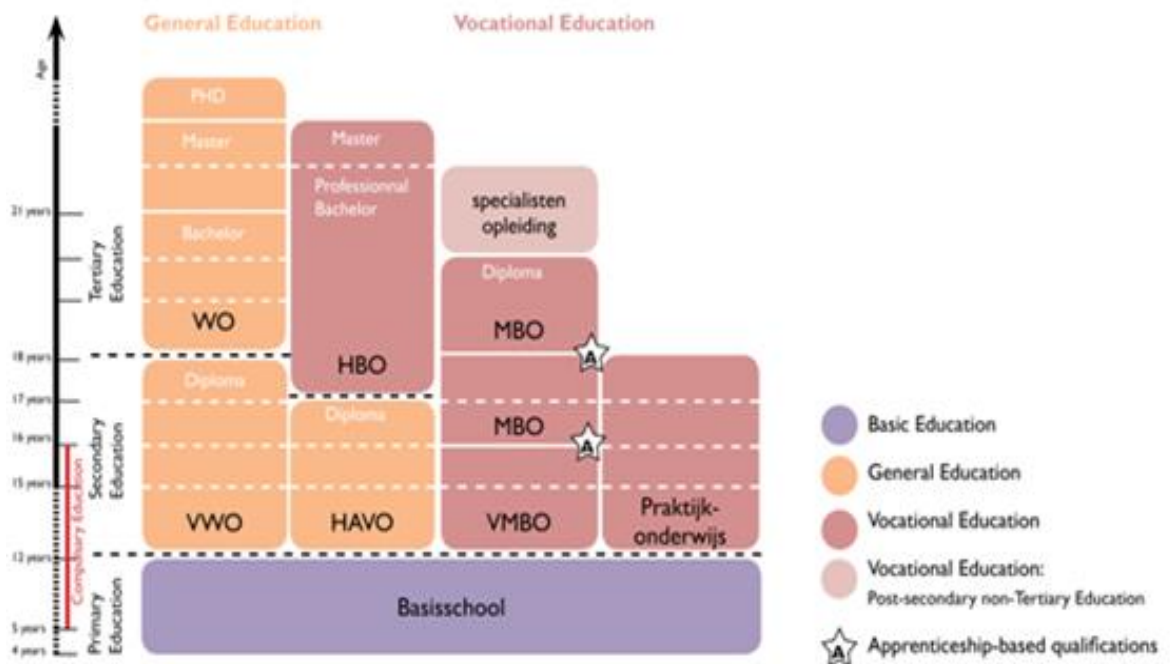


Figure 7: The Dutch education system (Onisep, n.d.b)

### 3.5.4 Exclusion

The policy of excluding children from schools permanently seems to contradict sharply with the notion of compulsory education. Yet, in England children can be excluded from school when they show difficult or challenging behaviour (Parsons, 2005). Schools cannot easily exclude children; there are strict guidelines for the exclusion of a child from a school. Nonetheless, 6685 children (0.08% of all school going children) were permanently excluded from school in England in 2015/2016. Persistent disruptive behaviour was in 34.2 percent of the cases the reason for permanent exclusion. In addition to these permanent exclusions, 339360 children (4.29%) were excluded for a fixed period. Of all students with at least one fixed period exclusion, 59.6 percent were only excluded once in the academic year, but 1.5 percent had received ten or more fixed period exclusions in the academic year 2015/2016. Many fixed period exclusions last only one day (45.7%), and only 13.3 percent lasted a week or longer. Both the number of permanent exclusions and the number of fixed period exclusions has increased compared to 2014/2015 (Department for Education, 2017).

In the Netherlands children can be permanently removed from school as well. However art. 27 of the Law on secondary education states that a student of compulsory school age can only be excluded from school permanently when the admission to another school is arranged. Yet, 56 percent of the chronic relative absentees has not been attending school for three months or longer, because the complexity of the problems of this group of children often make it difficult to find a suitable school (Staatssecretaris van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2016). This indicates that some Dutch children are not welcome at the school they are registered anymore (often due to their behaviour), even though another school has not been found. So, although the Dutch law does not allow it, in practice pupils in the Netherlands sometimes get permanently excluded from education as well.

In order to overcome that students see their fixed period exclusion as time off school, an increasing number of schools in England creates secluded spaces (Barker, Alldred, Watts & Dodman, 2010). In these spaces students are sitting in a cubicle, can only look at walls, have separate break times and a supervisor is watching them while doing school work. Barker et al. (2010) compare these secluded spaces with prisons, and question the desirability of this way of punishment. Both children who are permanently excluded and children who are excluded for a fixed time period are not receiving real education. Therefore, the question is whether permanent (and fixed-term) exclusions are in line with the right to education that every child has. At any rate, exclusions seem incompatible with the emphasis that is placed on compulsory education and school-attendance in England and the Netherlands.

### **3.5.5 Home education**

Mcintyre (2008) states that it is important to clearly differentiate between compulsory education and compulsory schooling, and not all research studies are doing this correctly. Going to school is not mandatory in England, but being educated is. Therefore, in England it is possible for parents to decide to home educate their children instead of sending them to a school. As Monk (2009) points out, the right of parents to home educate their children is not absolute or fundamental in England, as opposed to the child's right to education which is a fundamental right. The right to home educate is derived from section 7 of the 1996 education act which states:

'The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable-

- (a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and
- (b) to any special education needs he may have either by regular attendance at school or otherwise'

The words *or otherwise* create the opportunity for parents to decide to home school their children. Although it is possible to home educate children, only a small number of parents choose this option. It is hard to measure the prevalence of home education in England, because not all home-educated children are known to the local authority (Hopwood, O’neill, Castro & Hodgson, 2007). However, it is clear that relatively few children receive home education. Hopwood et al. (2007) show that in the nine local authorities in England in which they conducted their research only 0.09 percent to 0.42 percent of the total school population was home educated.

In the Netherlands the legal right to home educate children does not exist. The Education Law of 1969 article 2 states that all parents or carers need to assure that their children (as long as they are of compulsory school age) are registered at a school and attend this school regularly. Article 5 of this Law mentions three grounds on which parents can apply for an exemption of the compulsory schooling for their child:

- (a) The child is through mental or physical reasons unable to attend school.
- (b) Parents or carers have considerable reservations against the direction of the education provided in all schools within a reasonable distance of their home.
- (c) The child is registered at a school abroad and attends this school regularly.

When an exemption is given, there is no legal obligation for the child anymore to be educated. Although usually parents of children who received an exemption (especially when the exemption was on the basis of article 5 sub b, which is usually due to the religious orientation of the parents which could not be met by any schools within a reasonable distance) do home educate their children, legally they do not have to, and there is no supervision on whether or not these children receive education (Lautenbach, 2011).

### **3.5.6 Diversity of provision**

In comparison to other European countries, England has a relatively large number of independent schools. Independent schools (also known as private or public schools) are schools that do not receive money from the government and where parents have to pay large fees. In England around 7 percent of the children attend a private school (Walford, 2009). Although there is a large variation between private schools, they generally have a lower pupil-teacher ratio and are more often single-sex schools than state schools (Graddy & Stevens, 2005). Walford (2009) argues that children that attend the highly selective boarding schools leave undoubtedly with very good results, but questions whether this success is totally due to the school or that the social background of these

children is of influence. Graddy and Stevens (2005) found that private schools with a lower pupil-teacher ratio have better results than private schools with a higher pupil-teacher ratio.

As Patrinos (2013) points out, almost 70 percent of the schools in the Netherlands are private schools. However, this does not mean that parents have to pay fees for these schools. All these schools are members of a private board, but they are completely funded by the Dutch government (Patrinos, 2013). According to De Regt and Weenink (2005) it is only since the 1970s that some strictly private secondary schools were introduced in the Netherlands; on these schools parents do have to pay high fees if they want their child to attend the school. These schools are characterised by small class sizes, high discipline on behaviour and attendance, long school hours and the possibility to do the last two years of an official curriculum in one year. Most Dutch children in private schools have upper-middle-class parents. These parents send their child to a private school, when their child is unsuccessful in a state funded school and does not seem to be able to keep up to the social class position of the parents (De Regt & Weenink, 2005). These strictly private schools do not offer education at the lowest level (the lowest track, See Figure 7). Although the number is rising, only a small amount of children attends these private schools. In 1988 only 0.9 percent of the children attending secondary education at a level also offered by strictly private schools did actually participate in private education, this number has risen to 1.8 percent in 2002 (De Regt & Weenink, 2005). In conclusion, the majority of schools in the Netherlands is privately organised but state-funded, and only a limited number of schools is strictly private-funded. The proportion of students attending private education is higher in England compared to the Netherlands.

### **3.5.7 Social segregation in schools**

Because parents have to be able to afford the high fees of private schools and private schools often have admission criteria (based on academic ability which is linked to social background), having a relatively large proportion of children attending private schools can cause high levels of social segregation (Jenkins, Micklewright & Schnepf, 2008). However, with social segregation defined as the uneven distribution of children from different social backgrounds across schools, Jenkins et al. (2008) conclude that England's level of segregation is middle ranking (similar to the United States) compared to that of other industrialised countries. Countries characterised as having high levels of social segregation include Austria, Belgium and Germany. Furthermore, Jenkins et al. (2008) argue that segregation in England is not driven by the existence of private schools, but mostly by the uneven division of children from different social backgrounds in state schools. Although the proportion of students in England that attend a private school is relatively high, it is still only eight percent of all 15 year old children. Moreover, a large minority (around 20%) of the children in

private schools does not have parents from a high social background (based on the occupation of the parents). These factors explain that England's segregation in schools is not as high compared to some other European countries (Jenkins et al., 2008).

Debate exists about factors that do cause a high level of social segregation. Jenkins et al. (2008) suggest that countries with separate academic and vocational school tracks have a higher level of social segregation, which can be explained by the unevenness in social background between different school tracks. For this reason, countries where schools are selective in the admissions of students are likely to have a high level of social segregation. They mention Germany as an example and indeed show that Germany has a higher level of segregation than England. However, the Dutch education system also has different tracks but the Dutch level of segregation is characterised as 'low' compared with England (Jenkins et al., 2008). Furthermore, Jenkins et al. (2008) argue that the extent to which parents can choose a secondary school for their children is not of influence on the level of social segregation. However, Ritzen, Van Dommelen and De Vijlder (1997) disagree and conclude that parental choice can lead to a higher level of segregation. Focussing on ethnic segregation, both Karsten, Ledoux, Roeleveld, Felix and Elshof (2003) for the Netherlands and Johnston, Burgess, Wilson and Harris (2006) for England show that parental choice of schools does lead to ethnical segregation in schools.

### **3.6 Responding to vulnerable children**

Both in England and the Netherlands, the government has created the possibility to overtake parental responsibility from parents who are deemed incapable of looking after and providing appropriate care for their children. The possibility to take children into the care of the state is part of the child protection system in both countries. Because of the link between serious or persistent absence from school and vulnerability, some serious or persistent absentees are taken into care both in England and the Netherlands. This section will give a brief description of how the children's care system operates in each of the countries.

#### **3.6.1 The English care system**

In England, children who have been taken into the care of the state are often called 'looked after children'. If parents agree to their child becoming 'looked after', there is no need for a court order. However, when parents disagree, the council (often done by social services of the council) can apply to the court for a care or a supervision order to be put in place to protect a child (art. 31, children act 1989). The court can only make a care order when a child is suffering or is likely going to suffer significant harm and this harm is attributable to either the care given by the parents not being what could be reasonably expected or the child being beyond parental control (Art 31(2), Children act 1989). When a care order has been given by the court, the council has

permission to take a child into care. When a care order is in place, the council and the parents share parental responsibility. The council is responsible for some important decisions regarding 'looked after' children (both with consent of the parents and based on a care order) with regards to who will be caring for the children, the housing and the education (Government UK, n.d.). Care orders cannot be made anymore once a child is 17 years old (art. 31(3), children act 1989). Care orders last until a child has become 18 years old, the order has been discharged or parental responsibility has been given to someone else (for example through adoption).

With a supervision order the court places a child under the supervision of the local authority. The main difference with the care order is that the local authority does not have parental responsibility over the supervised child. A supervision order cannot last longer than one year, but may be extended up to a maximum of three years (Thomson Reuters, n.d.). The person who supervises the child on behalf of the local authority may advise and assist the parents in raising their child. In addition, the court may add certain requirements for the parents or the child to comply with to the order (Thomson Reuters, n.d.). When a local authority applies to the court for a supervision order, the court can decide to make a care order instead and the other way around (art. 31(5) sub a and b, children act 1989).

So, social services of the local authority play an important part in applying for care and supervision orders, but the court does have the final say in whether or not a local authority will get to supervise or take a child into care. However, when the danger is imminent anyone (but it often will be the local authority) can apply for an emergency protection order (art. 44 lid 1, Children Act 1989). An emergency protection order is temporarily; it can last up to eight days and can then be extended seven days (so 15 days in total)(Citizens advice, n.d.). In the mean time, the local authority can start care proceedings and apply for an (interim) care or a supervision order.

### **3.6.2 The Dutch Care system**

The measures that are available in the Netherlands to protect children from harm are quite similar to those in England. Everyone (both professionals (for example: teachers or the police) and citizens (for example: neighbours or family) can report a suspicion of child maltreatment to the 'Advies Meldpunt Kindermishandeling' (AMK) (in English: Advice contact point child abuse). In addition, only professionals can report worries about the physical or emotional development of a child to 'Bureau Jeugdzorg' (BJZ) (in English: Bureau Youth Care). The AMK and BJZ try to solve the situation with the family first, but when they do not succeed they can report the case to 'De raad voor de Kinderbescherming' (RVDK) (In English: Child Protection Service). The RVDK starts an investigation to establish whether or not there is severe risk of harm to (the development of) the child. When

this is the case and voluntary support is not sufficient (anymore) or parents refuse support, the RVDK can request the judge to impose a youth protection measure (Transitiebureau Jeugd, n.d.).

There are three different types of youth protection measures in the Netherlands, of which the 'ondertoezichtstelling' (OTS) (In English: placement under supervision of the state) is by far the most common. There are also three different types of OTS. In the normal OTS, the child usually still lives at home but it gets assigned a family guardian. Both the child and the parents are obliged to follow the instructions of the family guardian. The family guardian can, if necessary, also request a 'machting uithuisplaatsing' (MUHP) (in English: authorisation of moving the child out of the family home), which can then be imposed by a judge. Both the extension and discharge of an MUHP is usually linked to the extension and discharge of the OTS. The second type of OTS is the 'voorlopige ondertoezichtstelling' (VOTS) (In English: Provisional placement under supervision) with an MUHP. The RVDK, BJZ or the prosecution service can request the judge to impose a VOTS with MUHP when there is imminent risk for the child and a quick placement outside the house is necessary. The VOTS is valid for a maximum of three months. During these months the RVDK will start their normal investigation and decide whether or not they request a 'normal OTS' or a different child protection measure. The third type of OTS is an OTS with MUHP, but the young person has to be placed in a closed setting. This is requested when it is essential to provide a living situation in which the child (and the parents) cannot evade the necessary care (Transitiebureau Jeugd, n.d.).

The other two Dutch child protection measures are 'ontheffing uit het ouderlijk gezag' (In English: withdrawal of custody (parental authority)) and 'ontzetting uit het ouderlijk gezag' (in English: termination of custody (parental authority)) and they are much less common. Parents lose custody over the child and cannot take decisions about the child anymore, but in case of the withdrawal of custody parents will still be as involved with the child as possible. The child is usually placed in a foster family or a residential care facility when one of these measures is in place (Transitiebureau Jeugd, n.d.). So, both countries have child protection measures to protect children from possible harm that living with their parents might inflict on them. However, both in England and the Netherlands these measures are used as a last resort, and professionals usually first try to solve the situation without coercive measures.



### **3.7 (Legal) response to serious or persistent absence from school**

The previous sections have illustrated differences and similarities between England and the Netherlands in how society, the education system and the care system are organised. These differences and similarities might impact on serious or persistent absence from school at the macro level. Still influences within Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem, but maybe with a bit more of a direct impact on the serious or persistent absentees and their families are the policies of both the Dutch and the English Government on how to respond to serious or persistent absence from school. As mentioned before, in England legal actions in response to serious or persistent absence from school are aimed at the parents, whereas in the Netherlands the focus of legal action is on the student (over 12) who is seriously absent from school. Apart from who can be held legally responsible for the absence, the organisation that responds and the measures taken also differ between the countries (See Table 11). In addition, in the Netherlands not only parents and students can be held responsible, but the Dutch education inspection can impose an administrative fine on schools that do not properly report absence from school to the local authority (Staatssecretaris van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2013) .

**Table 11. An overview of the organisations that respond to parents and young people in relation to serious or persistent absence in England and the Netherlands**

	Parents	Young person
<b>School</b>	Eng – parenting contract – penalty notices (£60-£120) NL	– part-time timetable – Zorgadviesteam – a multi-agency consultation in which all children who have problems at a school will be discussed (unauthorised absence can be a reason to be discussed) – report serious absence to the local authority (education welfare officer)
<b>Local authority /education welfare service</b>	Eng – warning letter – parenting contract – penalty notice (£60-£120) – apply for education supervision order (ESO) – school attendance order – prosecution NL – prosecution – stopping child benefits	– consultation with school – (final) warning – send to HALT – referral to care – prosecution
<b>Justice system</b>	Eng – parenting order – level 3 fine (up to £1000) – level 4 fine (up to £2.500) – imprisonment (up to 3 months) NL – fine (up to €4050) – Imprisonment (up to 1 month)	– fine – community service sentence, work sentence or learning sentence – youth probation – (measure help & support, family therapy (FFT, MST))

### 3.7.1 Response to parents of serious or persistent absentees

#### *Schools*

Both in England and the Netherlands, schools are the first institution that will recognise the serious or persistent absence of a student. In England all schools should have a written behaviour policy in which they can include measures they can take against the parents when their child is not behaving or has irregular attendance (DFE, 2013a). One of the measures schools can use to improve the attendance of a student is a parenting contract. Parenting contracts are a voluntary agreement between parents and school, in which parents agree to meet the requirements that are set out in

the contract and schools promise to support the parents to comply with the contract (DFE, 2013a). A parenting contract is voluntary, but schools should record it when parents refuse to sign a parenting contract, because this can be used as evidence in court when a parenting order is requested by the local authority. In the Netherlands, parenting contracts do not exist and therefore schools cannot use this measure to try to improve the attendance of a student.

Besides parenting contracts, English schools can use penalty notices to encourage parents to ensure their child's school attendance. The circumstances under which head teachers can impose a penalty notice on parents are set out in 'The Education (Penalty Notices) (England) regulations 2007', to which some amendments were made in 2012 and 2013. Since 2013, the amount of the fine that schools can impose on parents is £60, when parents pay within 21 days. This will become £ 120 when they do not pay within these 21 days. Schools have to notify the local authority when they issue a penalty notice to parents, and the fine has to be paid to the local authority. The penalty notice can be imposed on each of the adults liable for the offence, so both parents can individually get a penalty notice for the same day(s)/period of unauthorised absence of their child. Schools can issue a penalty notice in cases of absence that they did not authorise, for example when parents take their children on a family holiday during term time. Furthermore, when parents allow their child to go to a public place within the first five days of an exclusion from school, a penalty notice can be imposed on the parents (DFE, 2013a). In the Netherlands, schools cannot impose penalty notices on parents. When parents take their child on a holiday during term time, the education welfare officer can refer them to the prosecution service. The fines are higher in The Netherlands compared to England; €100 per child per day with a maximum of €600 for the first week per family, and in the case of two weeks maximum €900 per family (Openbaar Ministerie, 2017).

#### *Local Authority*

Schools in both countries do have to report serious absence from school to the local authority or the education welfare service. In England, the local authority has a considerable amount of actions they can take. They can apply to the court for an education supervision order (ESO). If this ESO gets assigned, it is placed on the child and it means that the local authority will have to supervise the education of the child (at school or at home) for a specific period of time (DFE, 2013a). The DFE (2013a) advises local authorities to apply for an ESO before prosecuting the parents, but it is also possible to do both simultaneously. The local authority can also send parents a warning letter in which they allow the parents some time to assure an improvement in the school attendance of their child before they are being prosecuted. Furthermore, just as the school, the local authority has the possibility to use parenting contracts and penalty notices to encourage parents to ensure the child is attending school. Finally, parents can be prosecuted by the local authority because of

the persistent or serious absence of their child and in that case the court will decide on a sentence. When a child is not receiving suitable education (at school or in any other form) the local authority can issue a school attendance order. This order enforces the parents to register their child at a named school, when parents fail to do this they can be prosecuted.

In the Netherlands, the focus of legal action is on the child. However, if school reports a serious absentee to the education welfare officer, the officer will have a conversation with the parents/carers. Article 2 of the Dutch law on compulsory education 1969 states that parents/carers have to ensure that their child is registered at and attending a school. However, part 2 of the same article of the Law on Compulsory Education contends that parents/carers do not have to meet the requirement, set out in part 1 of article 2, if they can demonstrate that they cannot be held responsible for the non-attendance of their child. Therefore, the education welfare officer will only refer parents/carers to the prosecution service when he/she is convinced that the parents are (at least partly) responsible for the absence of their child. This means that both Dutch and English parents can be prosecuted for the serious or persistent absence of their child, but the conditions that have to be met before parents will be prosecuted vary per country. The Dutch education welfare officer can also stop child benefits when the absence of a student (aged 16 or 17) continues after the meeting with the parents. In Rotterdam, this measure was only used once in the academic year 2015/2016 (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2016). Finally, the education welfare officer can impose a penalty cost for each day a child is not attending school. And whilst this was imposed seven times in the year 2015/2016 in Rotterdam, the costs never had to be paid, because the child was attending school again (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2016).

### *Court*

In both countries, the court determines the punishment for parents who are prosecuted for their child's persistent or serious absence from school. In England the court can impose a penalty order, a level 3 fine, a level 4 fine or imprison the parents up to three months (DFE, 2013a). According to section 44f of the Education act 1996, a level 3 fine (up to £1000) can be imposed on the parents when their child of compulsory school age who is registered at a school fails to attend that school regularly, whereas a level 4 fine (up to £2500) or imprisonment can only be imposed when the parents know their child is not attending school regularly and without a reasonable justification fail to cause the child to attend regularly.

This exemplifies that both in England and the Netherlands it makes a difference whether parents are aware of the absence from school and can actually be held responsible for the non-attendance of their child. However, where parents in England who are not aware of irregular attendance can still be prosecuted and sentenced with a level 3 fine, Dutch parents who can

demonstrate they cannot be held responsible (e.g. because they are not aware of the absence of their child) will not be prosecuted at all. Yet, when Dutch parents are seen to be responsible for the serious or persistent absence from school they can get a fine (2<sup>nd</sup> category) or be imprisoned for up to one month (Article 26, part 1 of the Compulsory Education Law 1969). The maximum amount of a fine of the 2<sup>nd</sup> category is per 1 January 2014 €4050 (Article 23, part 4 of the (Dutch) Penal Code). Although the law allows the court to impose a prison sentence of up to one month on parents of persistent or serious absentees, in practice this almost never happens.

### **3.7.2 Response to the persistent or serious absentee**

#### *Schools*

Table 11 suggests that whereas in the Netherlands few of the possible responses are aimed at parents, in England there are almost no formal responses to the young person who is a serious or persistent absentee. Nevertheless, English schools try to encourage students to attend school regularly and the DFE (2013b) advises that in exceptional circumstances schools can place a pupil on a part-time timetable with the goal to reintegrate the student to full-time education. Hence, a school might use a very individualised part-time timetable to encourage a persistent or serious absentee to attend school more regularly and to guide them back into attending full-time.

In the Netherlands, almost every secondary school has a zorgadviesteam (ZAT) (in English: Care advisory team) which consists of professionals from various backgrounds. The ZAT comes together to confer the situation of various students, who experience problems in one or more areas, at a school. Students with ill physical health, mental health problems, learning difficulties or serious absence problems can be discussed in a ZAT. In many schools, the education welfare officer of the local authority takes part in the ZAT, which ensures that the background of serious absentees is known by the education welfare service. When a student is regularly unauthorised absent from school, but it is not (yet) serious, the ZAT will already set up a plan to prevent the student from becoming a serious or persistent absentee (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2014).

#### *Local Authority*

The English local authority does not formally respond to a persistent or serious absentee. In the Netherlands, the local authority appoints education welfare officers who deal with serious or persistent absence from school. Article 21(1) of the Compulsory Education Law 1969 states that a school has to report serious unauthorised absence to the local authority when a student of compulsory school age has missed a total of (at least) 16 school hours within a period of four consecutive weeks. After the school refers the serious absentee to the local authority, the

education welfare officer has a choice between various responses. Usually, a meeting with the student will take place in which the education welfare officer investigates the situation, and gives a final warning to allow the student some time to show improvement. The education welfare officer, however, frequently already has some information about the student before this meeting, because as outlined above in many schools the education welfare officer participates in the ZAT.

The education welfare officer can conclude that the young person experiences many problems and needs professional help to deal with these problems rather than a sanction for the unauthorised absence from school. In this case, the RVDK (2013) argues, the education welfare officer should refer the child to the organisations that can provide the young person or the family with the professional support that is needed. The RVDK (2013) points out that by putting (voluntary) care before legal action or prosecution of the young person, the criminalisation of serious absence caused by severe background problems can be prevented.

The education welfare officer does however also have some more justice-based options. If the absence from school does not exceed 10 days, the education welfare officer can refer the absentee to 'Het ALternatief' (HALT) (in English: the alternative). HALT is an organisation which aims to prevent young people from becoming a young offender. A young person that admits to committing a minor crime can receive a HALT-sanction. HALT uses short-term intervention programs aimed at young people. A young person who successfully completes the programme, avoids contact with the justice system and will not get a judicial note or a criminal record. A young person can only be sent to HALT once, the young person will be prosecuted when a second offence is committed or when the program is not completed successfully. This happened in Rotterdam in 21 percent of the persistent absence cases sent to HALT in the academic year 2015/2016 (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2016). Finally, when a serious or persistent absentee has already been sent to HALT before or when the absence from the young person surpasses 10 days, the education welfare officer can decide to report the student to the prosecution service who will then decide whether or not to prosecute the child for the serious or persistent absence from school.

### *Court*

Because students cannot be held legally responsible for their absence from school, the English court has no involvement with young people because of serious or persistent absence from school. When a young person has been prosecuted in the Netherlands, the RVDK will conduct research into the situation of the young person and give a sentence advise to the judge (RVDK, 2013). The court has several sentencing options. According to article 26 part 2 of the Compulsory Education Law 1969, the court has to sentence the young person with a main sentence as mentioned in article 77H, part 1 sub b of the (Dutch) Penal Code, which can be a fine or a community service sentence. A

community service sentence can be a working sentence (doing unpaid work in the community or doing unpaid work to repair the damage of the offence), a learning sentence (following a learning project) or a combination of both (Article 77h, part 2 sub a,b,c of the (Dutch) Penal Code). In practice, the court often chooses to punish the young person with a conditional sentence, with the special condition that the young person has to observe the guidance of the youth probation service. When a young person fails these condition or commits a new offence (i.e. is serious or persistent absence from school again) during the probation period, the community service sentence has to be executed. When a young person does not complete the community service sentence successfully, every 2 hours of community service sentence can be replaced by 1 day in a youth detention centre.

### **3.7.3 Welfare versus justice in the response to serious or persistent absence**

Responses to persistent or serious absence from schools are a classic social problem that illustrates the tension between welfare and justice in the response of the state. On the one hand professionals often argue that punishing the young person and/or the parents does not take away the root of the problem and will therefore likely have little effect. On the other hand, a more welfare based response is difficult for two reasons: Firstly, it is hard to get parents and young people to engage with professional help when there is no coercion. Teijl (2006) therefore indicates that when serious or persistent absence from school seems to be caused by underlying problems, using the criminal justice system to get the necessary care in place is desirable. Secondly, not punishing the young person and/or the parents might lead to the idea that serious or persistent absence from school is without consequences. This would suggest that the more justice based response might not have an effect on the family involved, but might work as a deterrent for others. This section has illustrated the differences and similarities in the response of England and the Netherlands to persistent or serious absence from school. Analysis of the formal or legal options suggests that both countries are more justice focussed in their response. The extent to which this is the case in practice, however, is part of the focus of this research.

## **3.8 Conclusion**

Most factors discussed in this chapter will not directly impact on an individual becoming a serious or persistent absentee. Most factors are macrosystems in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3), and therefore quite far away from the individual. However, some factors or a combination of some factors might have a more indirect impact on serious or persistent absence from school, and this might influence the prevalence of the problem in each country. This chapter has discussed many factors that might play a role in the background and can thereby contribute to the onset, progression or prevention of serious or persistent absence from school.

The different ways of measuring and registering absence from school make it difficult to compare the scope of serious or persistent absence from school in each country. However, the figures do suggest that the problem might be slightly larger in England, but it is also clear that it is a considerable problem in both countries. The prevalence of serious or persistent absence from school is greater in Rotterdam than in Portsmouth. The build-up of the population when looking at the proportion of different age groups seems fairly similar, but the ethnic build-up of the population in both countries is very different. So, if certain ethnic groups are more or less likely to become serious or persistent absentees, this might impact on the scope of the problem.

Furthermore, the health and well-being among Dutch youth is slightly better compared to the English youth. And Dutch youth are also performing better in mathematics and reading (according to the PISA test results), and seem to enjoy school more. Since general health, well-being and school performance and enjoyment are all related to serious or persistent absence from school, these factors might mean that Dutch youth in general are less likely to become serious or persistent absentees than English youth. However, all these figures are averages, so of course individual Dutch young people may not enjoy school. The same trend of making education compulsory until children are older is visible in both countries. In addition, both England and the Netherlands not solely use age anymore, but a combination of age and the possession of a qualification is now used as a criterion for compulsory schooling. Although this trend on learning longer is similar, the nature of the education system is very different. This research project will try to establish whether having a tracked education system affects serious or persistent absence from school.

The approach of both countries on how to deal with children at risk of significant harm from their home situations seems quite similar. This cannot be said for the response to serious or persistent absence from school to children who are over 12 years old. In the Netherlands these children might have to go through the youth justice system, because of their school absence. In England, the emphasis is very much on punishing the parents. The impact of these different responses to serious or persistent absentees and their families will be examined further in this research project.



## **Chapter 4 Research Design and Methods**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The current research was informed by research into the background and underlying characteristics of Dutch persistent absentees already conducted (by the researcher) before the start of this project. Due to the different focus, in response to serious or persistent absence from school, between the Netherlands (the young person in most cases and in some cases also the parents) and England (mainly the parents of the young person), it was considered worthwhile to set up a comparative research project in which both approaches could be investigated in more detail.

As previous chapters have pointed out, the issue of serious absence from school is not easy to define. Many factors are impacting on absence from school at different levels, which makes it a very complex 'real world' problem. Chapter 1 already indicated that serious or persistent absence from school can be viewed as a wicked problem, for which both scientists and policy makers seem unable to come up with an accurate and objective definition (Rittel & Webber, 1973). In addition, for some wicked problems it might be better to not aim to solve it but to try to cope with or tame the problem (Daviter, 2017 See Chapter 1). Robson (2005, p. 4) indicates that 'one of the challenges inherent in carrying out investigations in the 'real world' lies in seeking to say something sensible about a complex, relatively poorly controlled and generally 'messy situation''. Therefore, a flexible research design was adopted, which allows the design to evolve and develop while the research is in progress (Robson, 2005). This means, for example, that data collected using one research method can influence the next research method.

Finally, the research design not only had to be suitable to deal with the complex nature of absence from school, but also needed to be appropriate for the comparison of two countries. This means that challenges associated with comparative research also had to be considered. Cross-national studies have to deal with even more methodological difficulties than studies focusing only on one country (Øyen, 1990). The next sections of this chapter will explain the overall research approach, the choice for the research design, the research methods employed within the chosen design and discuss the consequences of the chosen design for the implementation and possible impact of the research project.

### **4.2 Overall research approach**

A comparative overall research approach was adopted. Due to the complex nature of serious or persistent absence from school and all possible related factors in two different countries, a flexible design which allows the researcher to adapt to the circumstances seemed most suitable. In line with this flexible design, a pragmatist philosophy to conducting the research was adopted.

#### **4.2.1 Comparative research**

The main aims of this research (See Chapter 1) focus on comparing the background of and response to serious or persistent absence from school in the Netherlands and England. A focused comparison of two cities was chosen to fulfil the aims; Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Portsmouth in England. These cities could be seen as case studies and were used to get an understanding of the background of and response to persistent or serious absence from school in England and the Netherlands. The results of the research at this local level were then located within the national context in both countries.

It is important to consider what distinguishes comparative research projects from non-comparative research projects. Ragin (1989) argues that although it might seem straightforward, much debate exists about how to define comparative research. Not every research study that involves more than one country can be defined as comparative and not every comparative research project deals with more than one country. A feature, however, that clearly differentiates comparative research from non-comparative research is that in comparative research the 'macrosocial level' always plays a part (Ragin, 1989). This indicates that certain phenomena are not only studied at the micro case study level, but different macrosocial variables will be taken into account. Following this defining characteristic of comparative research, the current project could be considered comparative, since differences between the two countries at the macrosocial level (See Chapter 3; e.g. level of inequality, structure of the education systems and organisation of the welfare state) have been considered when studying serious or persistent absence from school in the two cities. Moreover, the theoretical framework, that formed the basis for this project, takes macrosocial variables into account and acknowledges their possible influence on persistent absence from school since they are seen as macrosystems in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3). Therefore, this research project can be classified as a comparative project.

#### **4.2.2 Most similar versus most different**

After the decision was made to study serious or persistent absence from school comparatively, the objects of the comparison still had to be determined as well. It is possible to compare two objects that are very similar to each other ('most-similar design') or two objects completely different ('most-different design') (Pakes, 2010a). As described earlier, the Netherlands and England were chosen because of their distinct responses to serious or persistent absence from school. Yet, when other characteristics of the two countries are taken into account, it has to be concluded that the countries are more similar than different (i.e. they are both developed Western European democracies, both welfare states and both countries have a long tradition of compulsory

schooling). It can be argued that it is more likely for countries that are similar to learn from each other (Teune, 1990). Since the possibility of policy transfer was one of the main reasons for the selection of a comparative design, the 'most-similar design' seemed the most suitable design to compare the characteristics of and response to serious or persistent absence from school in the Netherlands and England.

A holistic comparison of the two countries would possibly lead to a very global description of the problem in the two countries with little attention paid to the differences within each country. As Øyen (1990) indicates the variety within a country might for some variables be greater than the variety between different countries. To prevent a too general comparison of the two countries as a whole, a focused comparison of two cities (one in England and one in the Netherlands) was employed. Rotterdam was chosen in the Netherlands, because the researcher had already collected data in Rotterdam for an MA thesis. The 'most-similar design' that was adopted means that after Rotterdam was selected, a similar city to use as a case study was sought in England. Portsmouth was chosen, because both Portsmouth and Rotterdam have a sizeable working-class community, are ports and serious or persistent absence from school is in both cities a larger problem compared to the respective national average (See Chapter 3, Section 3.2.3). The similarity of these cities, therefore, makes them suitable as case studies, since variations between these cities and the national average are likely to be similar. The in-depth comparison of serious or persistent absence from school and the response to it in Rotterdam and Portsmouth does justice to the variability that might exist within each country, but these two cities can both be treated as an example of the response to serious or persistent absence from school in the respective country. This means that these cities can be used to discover how serious or persistent absence from school manifests itself in both countries and whether the response can be transferred between the countries.

#### **4.2.3 Advantages and disadvantages of comparative research**

There are numerous benefits of comparative research. The main reason a comparative project was chosen to study this particular topic is that it enables countries to learn from each other. The possibility of policy transfer between different countries can be a major advantage of comparative research (Pakes, 2010a). Because of the different approach England and the Netherlands adopt in responding to serious or persistent absence from school, a comparison will give both countries insights into other ways of responding to absence from school. This might eventually even lead to the introduction of policies related to absence from school 'learned' from the other country. On the other hand, it might show negative aspects of certain responses in one country and therefore prevent the other country from adopting that specific approach to serious or persistent absence from school. This means, for example, that if the English government would

consider introducing the possibility of punishing the young person for persistent absence from school with a community service sentence, the results of this study could indicate whether or not this is a successful response in the Netherlands. And if this was not successful in the Netherlands, the English government could develop a different policy instead.

There are other factors that contributed to choosing a comparative research design. As Pakes (2010a) indicates, academic curiosity can be a good reason to choose a comparative perspective when researching a specific topic. Because the response to an (at first sight) very similar problem is so different between the two countries, the question which approach works best sprang immediately to mind. Furthermore, it was considered that in both countries some research into serious or persistent absence from school was already conducted, but a comparative study of the Netherlands and England focusing on absence from school did not exist.

The disadvantages of comparative research also had to be taken into account. Aspects of the situation in the two countries are likely to be different, which might have a big impact on the interpretation and comparability of the results of the research. Single methods designs, especially quantitative designs, in which only one research method is used, therefore, hold many problems for comparative research studies (Osborn, 2004). Hence a flexible research design was chosen, which allowed for the collection of rich qualitative data and for the use of a range of research methods, so that data triangulation could be used. But even then, getting samples and data comparable remains a challenge in comparative research.

#### **4.2.4 Pragmatism**

The complexity of a comparative study into a wicked problem such as serious or persistent absence from school provided this research project with some challenges. A pragmatist approach was taken, because it seemed most suitable to deal with the complex interplay between different factors relating to serious or persistent absence from school. In pragmatism the starting point for the research is the problem that is investigated, which indicates that rather than focusing on specific methods, all available approaches to understand the problem can be used (Creswell, 2014). With serious or persistent absence from school as the starting point, the research became automatically more inductive than deductive. Pragmatism works well with the flexible research design that was adopted, since the flexible design allows the research to develop while it proceeds to use all methods and chances to gain access to relevant data. This also indicates that both quantitative and qualitative research methods could be employed.

Robson (2005) suggests that a positivist epistemology does not work for research that takes place in the real world, since positivists believe that knowledge can be objective. Positivism is, therefore, mainly associated with quantitative research methods. Relativistic approaches, on the

other hand, seem to stress the use of qualitative research methods and deny the existence of one reality that is true (Robson, 2005). A relativist epistemology would be more suitable than a positivist one for this research project since it stresses that it is vital to view phenomena in their context. Yet, a completely relativist approach would not start off with a theoretical framework (as set out for this research project in Chapter 1), but the theory would have to be derived from the data. Moreover, the mixed methods design of this study, in which besides qualitative data also quantitative data are used is not compatible with the relativist approach (Robson, 2005). The pragmatist approach that is adopted, however, does acknowledge that both qualitative and quantitative research methods can be useful if they work for the research problem at hand. As Hothersall (2016, p. 25) indicates for the social work profession: 'Pragmatism, as both a social theory, and as an epistemological approach affords the profession the opportunity to utilise all of its strengths by embracing plurality and diversity in terms of both a 'world-view' and an inclusive approach to research and practice.'

Applying the pragmatist philosophy to this comparative study into serious or persistent absence from school meant that some of the difficulties encountered could be managed. Rather than expecting to encounter 'ideal' research situations, the researcher was prepared to come across very challenging situations and to adapt to the circumstances. To get to the bottom of the problem in both countries, therefore, the researcher accepted the impossibility of getting fully comparable samples or data. Instead, this study aimed to make the most of the available data and consequently shortcomings in datasets were dealt with during the data analysis or when the results were reported.

### **4.3 Research design**

The flexible comparative research design allowed for the use of a range of different research methods to collect different types of data. First of all, publicly available secondary data were used to get an idea of the scale and scope of the problem at the national level in both countries. Secondly, the focused comparison of Rotterdam and Portsmouth meant that in-depth information on serious or persistent absentees and the response to serious or persistent absence from school in both cities had to be collected. To be able to compare the backgrounds and characteristics of persistent absentees in both countries, secondary data analysis in the form of case file analysis was conducted. This method was also used to discover which pathways the young people followed after their serious or persistent absence from school and the response to it. In addition, some case studies of individual serious or persistent absentees in both countries were provided. These case studies were also based on case files of the selected absentees and were therefore also based on secondary data. Finally, professionals working in the field of serious or persistent absence from school in both cities

were interviewed (i.e. primary data collection) to explore whether opinions and beliefs about the causes and effective responses to serious or persistent absence from school are different for professionals in the two countries. Table 12 provides an overview of the different research methods employed in the research project.

**Table 12. Overview of the different research methods**

Type of data	The Netherlands (Rotterdam)	England (Portsmouth)
<b>Secondary data (national level)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Population figures</li> <li>○ Absence figures</li> <li>○ Government reports on absence from school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Population figures</li> <li>○ Absence figures</li> <li>○ Government reports on absence from school</li> </ul>
<b>Secondary data (local level)</b>		
<b>1. Case file analysis (compiling database)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Characteristics and follow-up of the whole sample (N=225).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Characteristics and follow-up of different samples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– YOT (N=110)</li> <li>– EIA (N=110)</li> <li>– C&amp;C (N=73)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>2. Case studies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 8 case studies which reflect the groups based on the vulnerability and offending continua.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 8 case studies which reflect the groups based on the vulnerability and offending continua.</li> </ul>
<b>Primary qualitative data (Local level)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Semi-structured interviews with 6 professionals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 2 education welfare officers</li> <li>– 2 youth probation officers</li> <li>– 1 case investigator at the RvdK</li> <li>– 1 case coordinator at the RvdK</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Semi-structured interviews with 6 professionals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 1 education-YOT link worker</li> <li>– 1 admissions, exclusions and reintegration manager</li> <li>– 1 YOT case worker</li> <li>– 1 YOT practice leader</li> <li>– 1 project worker at Barnardos</li> <li>– 1 school attendance manager</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

#### **4.3.1 National secondary data**

The secondary data collected at the national level were used to describe both countries, mainly focussing on those variables that might be of influence on serious or persistent absence from school. Furthermore, absence figures were analysed for each country in order to compare the scale of the problem, with special attention to the absence figures for Portsmouth and Rotterdam and how they compare to the respective national absence figures. This means that both qualitative and

quantitative secondary data were taken into account. Yet, as Schaible (2012) points out finding good comparable secondary data is always a challenge when comparing different countries. The main problem with the comparability of the data for this research was that the way absence from school is measured and registered is different in England compared to the Netherlands. To summarise, the national secondary data – ranging from government reports to official absence figures – were primarily used to get an indication of the differences and similarities between the two countries and to compare the nature and scale of serious or persistent absence from school in the two countries (See Chapter 3). In addition to government reports and official absence figures, reports of international organisations were used to compare England and the Netherlands. The report of the WHO was used to discover the health and well-being of 11-, 13-, and 15-year olds in England and the Netherlands. The PISA study revealed how well both Dutch and English students performed in different subjects at school. Finally, OECD data indicated the different levels of inequality in England and the Netherlands. Reports from national charities and the children's commissioner were not used because it was difficult to find comparable reports in the other country.

As mentioned before, macrosocial variables that could impact on the object of study are a key element of comparative research. Consequently, it was considered important to use these secondary data to get an understanding of these different variables in the two countries. Because the impact of these macrosocial variables is not very direct (See Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Chapter 1 Figure 3), it is very hard to measure the exact influence of these variables on the onset and existence of serious or persistent absence from school. For that reason, this project aimed to locate the results of the local research (in Portsmouth and Rotterdam) within the national context in each country. On the other hand, the national data could contribute to understanding serious or persistent absence from school at the local level. After all, as Pakes (2010b) indicates there is an interplay between the national and local that cannot be ignored in comparative research.

#### **4.3.2 Local secondary data**

##### *Case file analysis - Quantifying qualitative data*

In both cities the researcher gained access to case files of serious or persistent absentees to discover the background and characteristics of the persistent absentees. In Rotterdam, the researcher previously had access to the case files for the MA research, because the researcher was doing an internship at the research department of the RVDK. The researcher, therefore, used contacts to gain access to these case files again. In Portsmouth, contacts of the first supervisor were

used initially to obtain access to the case files. In both countries, the main element that was analysed in the case files was an assessment completed by a professional to address the risk and protective factors of the young person (in England these assessments were called ASSETS). Because the case files in both countries were produced by different professionals, this could cause problems with regards to the 'inter-rater reliability' (not that of the researcher, but because different professionals assess situations differently). The assessment instruments that were used in both countries, should limit this problem, but even with an assessment instrument one professional might report a factor as problematic (for example the relationship between the young person and the parents/caregivers), whereas another could interpret this same factor as not problematic (and therefore not report it as a troubled relationship). Therefore, the researcher had to take this into account when collecting and analysing the local secondary data.

In Rotterdam, the case files were already analysed for the MA thesis research, and were now looked at again to establish the trajectories the young people followed after the involvement of the justice system. In England a sample was drawn and case files were used to explore both the background and characteristics and the trajectories followed after the response of schools and the local authority to the serious or persistent absentees and in some cases their parents.

#### *How the MA thesis research informed the research project*


The researcher conducted the research for the MA thesis as part of an internship at the research department of the RVDK. The research the researcher conducted for the MA thesis not only informed this research project, but the data collected were re-used in this study as well. The sample for the MA thesis consisted of 225 Dutch young people who were taken to court between April and November 2009 because of their persistent absence from school. In the Netherlands, a young person will be referred to the prosecution service when the unauthorised absence from school exceeds 16 hours in 4 weeks. This means that using those absentees that were taken to court as the sampling frame, all persistent absentees within that time period could become part of the sample. The main conclusion of the MA thesis was that serious or persistent absentees who were taken into care (so placed under supervision of the state) experienced the most problems, followed by absentees who were solely known to the RVDK because of their absence from school, and those absentees who had also committed some offences experienced the least problems. This research project, wanted to also explore the characteristics of English absentees (in the same way as the researcher had done this during the MA for the Dutch absentees), and to also follow up those absentees (via case files again) four years later to establish the pathways the serious or persistent absentees had followed after the response of the local authority in both countries.



To establish the characteristics and risk factors of the absentees in the MA thesis, a data collection instrument was developed by the researcher. This instrument was based on research literature on risk factors for serious or persistent absence from school and an initial scan of about ten case files (to establish which data would be available). A translated and extended version (with follow-up questions to establish the trajectories absentees had taken after the initial local authority response) of this data collection instrument was used for this study (See Appendix A). This instrument exists of some open and closed questions and propositions on which each young person scores a specific number. These numbers were then entered into a large excel database. This was a way of quantifying the qualitative data available in the case files. It enabled the researcher to compare different groups of absentees in both countries and to evaluate the different background and characteristics of these groups of serious or persistent absentees (See Chapter 5).

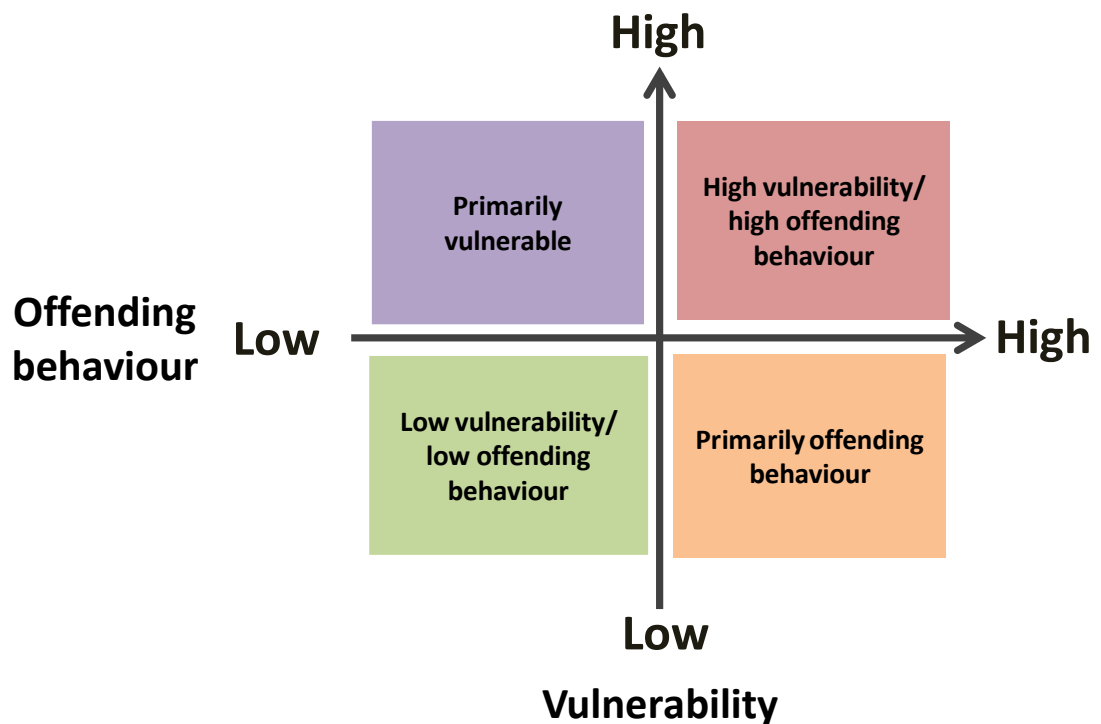
Table 12 indicates that in the Netherlands just one sample was drawn, whilst in England three different samples were used. In the Netherlands convenience sampling was used to select the 225 cases; A list with all absentees that had been taken to court because of their absence from school between April 2009 and November 2009 was requested. Then, out of the 319 absentees on that list, the 225 for whom a digital case file was available were selected. All Dutch absentees were, therefore, taken to court because of their persistent or serious absence from school. However, some of them had also committed other offences and in some cases the RVDK was already involved, because an investigation into whether or not the child should be placed under supervision of the state had been conducted.

The aim in England was to create a total sample that was as comparable as possible to the one in the Netherlands. This means that the researcher aimed to get a total sample in England in which some cases were only serious or persistent absentees, some had also committed offences and some were taken into care. In England, therefore, samples were drawn from three different datasets:

-  **Youth Offending Team (YOT):** This sample consists of 110 persistent absentees who had involvement with the YOT between 1 September 2009 and 31 august 2010 (the academic year 2009/2010). There were 417 young people who had involvement with the YOT during this time period. The researcher then read the assets for these young people to check whether they had experienced serious or persistent absence problems at school. This was the case for 177 (42.45%) of the young people. Random sampling was then used to select 110 cases to be included in the research. The cases in the YOT sample had all committed at least one offence.

- ✚ **Early Intervention Audit (EIA):** This sample is taken from all secondary school pupils that were flagged as either medium or high absence from school in the EIA in September 2010 (for which the data are collected in the academic year 2009/2010). In total 234 secondary school children were flagged as serious absentees in this audit. However, of these 234 young people, 21 were already in the YOT group. The final sampling frame, therefore, consisted of 213 medium or high flagged absentees. Random sampling was used again to select 110 absentees. The aim for this sample was to include serious or persistent absentees who had not been taken into care and had not committed any offences.
- ✚ **Care & Custody (C&C):** This sample consists of 73 persistent absentees that were part of another research project looking at children who had been taken into care or custody between 1 December 2008 and 30 November 2011. There were originally 92 persistent absentees in this sample (using the 15% threshold), but 19 of them were already part of the YOT sample. To avoid having the same pupils in different samples, these 19 serious absentees were left out of the C&C sample. This sample thus consists of absentees who had been taken into care, taken into custody or taken into care and custody.

In order to establish whether different serious or persistent absentees had a different background, different characteristics and different risk factors at play, they were divided into four different groups based on their level of offending and level of vulnerability. Both the level of offending and the vulnerability level are treated as a continuum on which each absentee can be placed. So, a serious or persistent absentee who did not commit any offences, will be placed at the very low end of the offending behaviour continuum. The combination of these two continua leads to four quadrants, each of which represents a group that will be compared in the next chapter (See Figure 8). Chapter 5 will point out how each absentee is placed into one of the four groups.



**Figure 8: The intersecting vulnerability/offending behaviour continua**

#### *Advantages and disadvantages of the intersecting vulnerability/offending behaviour continua*

The main advantage of the use of the groups based on the intersecting vulnerability/offending behaviour continua was that it allows to explore the influence of the level of offending behaviour and the level of vulnerability on serious or persistent absence from school. This was one of the aims of the research project, and therefore the groupings are very useful. However, by dichotomising both the offending behaviour variable and the vulnerability variable you lose some of the richness of the data. Moreover, the use of the variable 'taken into care' to create the dichotomy for the vulnerability variable is not ideal, but with the available data the best possible choice.

Because of the lack of available data on the level of offending and vulnerability in the English EIA and C&C sample, the English *primarily vulnerable* group consisted only of five serious or persistent absentees. It would have possibly been better, to select more cases from the YOT database in England and to then not include the EIA and C&C sample. This would mean that the total sample in England would not be as comparable to the Dutch sample (since all absentees in the English sample would have committed at least one offence in this scenario), but there would be enough information available for all English absentees. So, overall the size of the groups would then be more comparable to the size of the Dutch groups.

### *Case studies of persistent absentees*

After the different groups of serious or persistent absentees were described using the quantitative data, eight serious or persistent absentees in both countries were selected as case studies. These case studies were still based on case files. Pakes (2010a) distinguishes four different types of case studies: Representative cases, prototypical cases, deviant cases and archetypical cases. For this research project, cases that were representative for the group they belong to were chosen to give a more detailed description of the lives of the young people in each of the different groups established by the quantitative data analysis of the case files. The qualitative case studies gave more meaning to the description of the different types of persistent absentees provided by the analysis of the large database and allowed to discover the interplay between factors at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3).

For the selection of cases to become case studies the amount of information available had to be taken into account. Case files without enough information had to be excluded and could not be selected as a case study. A purposive sample was then used to select the most representative cases for each group (See Figure 8 for an overview of the four different groups). In each country, two *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour absentees*, two *primarily vulnerable*, two *primarily offending*, and two *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour absentees* were selected. The purposive sample allowed the researcher to choose the cases that were most likely to lead to interesting results and is a very suitable sampling method in a flexible research design (Robson, 2005). The use of case studies prevented the loss of the rich qualitative data that were available in the case files. The case studies were illustrative and gave meaning to the results of the more quantitative analysis of the large samples of serious or persistent absentees. Therefore, the case studies complemented the general description of different types/groups of serious or persistent absentees.

### *Advantages and disadvantages of case file analysis*

The case files analysed were secondary data which were collected by and for organisations working with the serious or persistent absentees, and not for the purpose of the current research project. Therefore, the researcher did not have control over the information collected. This meant that some of the questions of interest to this research could not be answered on the basis of the available case files and it was impossible to ask follow-up questions to the persistent absentees. These are all well-known disadvantages of using secondary data (Vartanian, 2011). However, the assessment tools that were used in both countries to create the ASSETS and reports meant that professionals were analysing the risk and protective factors of each young person. Therefore, the way the data was recorded in both England and the Netherlands fits with Farrington's risk and

protective factor paradigm (See Chapter 1). Advantages of using secondary data are that it is often less costly than the use of primary data, less time consuming and does not create much inconvenience for participants (Vartanian, 2011). A difference between the secondary data used compared to many other secondary data sets is that the data used in this research project are not publicly available. The researcher had to negotiate access to the data sets and the data are not openly available on the internet. This raises some ethical concerns, which will be further discussed in the section about ethical considerations.

Focusing more specifically on the use of case files, Robson (2005) suggests that an advantage of the use of documents is that it is an unobtrusive measure. A document is not affected by being used and therefore case file analysis is also a non-reactive research method. Furthermore, the absentees in the sample were not actively involved in the research project and therefore the research did not place an extra burden on these often very vulnerable young people. On the other hand, in the Netherlands the data were collected to give a sentence advice to the judge, which might influence the reliability of the data in the case files. After all, the young person and their parents provide information to a professional from the Dutch child protection service who then uses that information to decide which sentence advice to give to a judge. A young person could therefore give false information to get a milder sentence. This had to be taken into account when analysing the available case files.

#### **4.3.3 Interviews with professionals**

After the secondary data collection in Rotterdam and Portsmouth, primary data were collected in both cities. Semi-structured interviews with professionals working in the field of serious or persistent absence from school were conducted. Semi-structured interviews are often used in a flexible research design and are suitable to discover attitudes and beliefs of the interviewee (Robson, 2005). The main aim of the interviews in this research was to compare and contrast the views and beliefs of professionals working with serious absentees in both cities. The rich primary qualitative data collected were used to discover how the problem is viewed in both countries and what people who work in the field of absence from school perceive as the best response to the problem. The interview schedule used for the interviews is placed in Appendix B. A mix of purposive and convenience sampling was used to select professionals to participate in the interviews. First of all, the researcher decided which type of professionals would be interesting to interview in respect to the focus of the research project. Then the organisations were approached and asked for their cooperation. If more than one person was working in the role, the professional who was willing to participate was selected. This was in line with the pragmatist philosophy that was adopted for this research project.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the rich and detailed data gathered in the interviews. Thematic analysis seemed a useful technique within the flexible design of the project, since it could lead to a very rich and detailed account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was used as a 'contextualist method', in which both the individual manner in which professionals gave meaning to their experiences was acknowledged, but where attention was also paid towards the way in which the larger context impacts on the beliefs and experiences of the professional (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using thematic analysis, therefore, was consistent with the overall research approach of the study. Appendix C gives an example of the coding process of the interviews.

#### **4.3.4 Mixed methods**

After all the different data collection methods used have been described, it is clear that both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed within this research. This means that the flexible design could be classified as a mixed-methods design. There exist, however, different types of mixed methods designs. As Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) suggest quantitative or qualitative methods could be of equal importance within the design or one of them could be dominant. Furthermore, quantitative and qualitative methods could run concurrently or sequentially. In the current design, there were more qualitative methods used and as a result qualitative methods could be regarded as dominant over quantitative methods. Furthermore, the decision was made to let the collection and analysis of the quantitative data inform the selection of cases and construction of the interview schedule for the qualitative data. Consequently, the methods were conducted sequentially with the quantitative method preceding the qualitative methods.

The use of multiple methods to research the topic was in line with the pragmatist approach adopted for this research project. It was acknowledged that using only a single method would be unlikely to lead to a comprehensive understanding of the complex problem (See Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 for more information on treating serious or persistent absence from school as a wicked and complicated issue). One of the benefits of using multiple methods is that triangulation can take place (Robson, 2005). The findings from the different research methods employed in this project could complement each other to gain a more detailed insight into serious or persistent absence from school in both countries. The use of multiple methods, moreover, could enhance the rigour of the study (Robson, 2005).

## **4.4 Impact of the research**

### **4.4.1 Ethical considerations**

There were certain ethical issues that had to be considered during the process of conducting the research. The whole research project has been ethically reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Criminal Justice studies from the University of Portsmouth (Appendix C shows a copy of the approval letter). Due to the vulnerability of serious or persistent absentees, it was important to ensure that the psychological well-being of those absentees that were analysed in the research project was ensured (British Society of Criminology, 2015). Because the research involving the serious or persistent absentees was only based on secondary data and on historic datasets, there was no risk to the well-being of those individuals. For those absentees that were selected as a case study, it was ascertained they could not be identified on the basis of the information provided. In addition, the researcher was CRB-checked in both countries before access to the case files was given.

However, as Barlow (2016) points out, the use of documents is not a guarantee that no emotional harm is done. Even though the researcher would only read case files and not meet the serious or persistent absentees in person, it was not certain that reading the case files of the lives of these young people (some of whom had been subjected to physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse) would not be emotionally demanding on the researcher. It could potentially be hard for the researcher to detach from the cases, which could lead to emotional harm to the researcher (Barlow, 2016). The researcher was prepared for this and agreed with the gatekeepers (both in Portsmouth and Rotterdam) to speak to them when it affected the psychological well-being of the researcher. However, this turned out not to be necessary.

As described above some of the secondary data that were used were not publicly available, which means that it is more difficult for other researchers to corroborate the results of the research. The researcher had to gain access to this data and due to confidentiality issues, it is not possible to show these data to everyone who might be interested. However, the supervisors of the researcher and both examiners are allowed to view the excel databases (which are anonymous) that were created for the analysis of the cases. As Irwin (2013) indicates, another partly epistemological and partly ethical issue with the use of qualitative secondary data is that the researcher was not involved in the data creation. It is, therefore, important that the researcher is aware of the context in which the data are collected to ensure effective interpretation of the data (Irwin, 2013). The researcher was aware that the data in the case files were collected by professionals in the context of risk assessments of the young person (often to inform the court), and the researcher recognised

that this was the case throughout the process of data analysis, interpretation and publication of the results.

The statement of ethics of the British Society of Criminology (2015) was also followed for the primary data collection in this research. All professionals were informed about the purpose of the study before they gave their consent. Furthermore, they were all aware that their participation was entirely voluntary and they were notified that they could withdraw at any moment during the interview and up until one month after the interview took place. All participants gave their consent for the audio recording of the interview. Furthermore, an early draft of Chapter 7 (the results chapter in which the interviews were analysed) was sent to all interviewees, who were given a couple of weeks to make any clarifications on the write-up and interpretation of their interview in this chapter. For both the interviews and the collection of the case file data, the researcher had to ensure that participating organisations were not affected unnecessarily (British Society of Criminology, 2015). The researcher, therefore, informed organisations beforehand about the resources (time, computer access etc.) that were required to perform the research (interviews and case file analysis).

#### **4.4.2 Reliability, validity and generalisation**

As mentioned above, the emphasis in this flexible research design was on the qualitative data collection. In flexible and more qualitative research designs researchers often focus on validity rather than reliability to argue for the trustworthiness of the research (Boeije, 2005; Cresswell, 2003; Robson, 2005). In this project a number of strategies were used to demonstrate the validity of the research project. First of all, the validity was shown by accurately describing all the steps and decisions made when conducting the research and analysing the data (Boeije, 2005). Secondly, the accuracy of the obtained interview data was checked by sending the results of the thematic analysis back to the interviewees to check whether their views and opinions were reflected accurately. Creswell (2003) calls this strategy member-checking. Thirdly, both when reporting the case studies and the thematic analysis of the interviews, a rich, thick and detailed description was given (Boeije, 2005). This might facilitate readers to empathise with the participants and could help them to get a better picture of the setting in which the absence took place (Cresswell, 2003). Finally, the researcher reflected upon the possible personal bias brought to the research when interpreting and reporting the results.

Generalising the results to the two countries of interest could be difficult. Since Portsmouth and Rotterdam, the cities where the focused comparison was conducted, could by no means be seen as representative for the whole country. Moreover, the pragmatist approach of the research and a lack of random sampling ensured that generalising the results in a statistical manner as



possible in fixed quantitative designs would be impossible. That is not to say, however, that the results of this project cannot be used to describe serious or persistent absence from schools outside Portsmouth and Rotterdam at all. As Boeije (2005) indicates, in designs where qualitative methods are used, external validity can be obtained by looking for theoretical or content generalisation rather than statistical or probabilistic generalisation. This means that theoretical insights gained from a study could possibly be applied to similar situations. In this research, external validity was obtained by locating the results of the local research into the national contexts and debates around serious or persistent absence from school.

#### **4.5 Limitations**

The use of a flexible research design with both quantitative and qualitative research methods underpinned by a pragmatist philosophy was necessary to make the comparison work. By employing a variety of research methods it was possible to investigate the problem in both countries from different angles. The comparative aspect of the research, however, has also led to some limitations. First and foremost, it was difficult to get the samples in both countries completely comparable. The sample in the Netherlands was already drawn for the Masters thesis of the researcher, and consisted of 225 serious or persistent absentees of whom some might be seen as only absentees, some had also committed other offences, some had been taken into care and some had both been taken into care and had committed other offences. To get the sample as comparable as possible, in Portsmouth samples had to be drawn from three different databases. However, especially the information available for the EIA sample was not sufficient to draw conclusions about their level of vulnerability and offending behaviour. It was also impossible to obtain enough information for the serious or persistent absentees of the EIA-sample, and to some extent also the C&C sample, about the risk factors they were experiencing. This means that in the end most information about England was based on the serious or persistent absentees in the YOT sample. This is likely to have influenced the results of the research, because all serious or persistent absentees in the YOT sample had committed at least one offence and this was not the case for all Dutch serious or persistent absentees in the sample. Furthermore, as a result of the exclusion of absentees in the EIA and the C&C sample for some variables, the English *primarily vulnerable* group only consisted of 5 absentees on these variables. In addition, because the samples in both countries were drawn from lists of young people who were serious or persistent absentees and not from parents who were prosecuted because of the absence of their child, there were not many parents prosecuted in both countries. This made it more difficult to assess the effectiveness of the official response to the parents at the level of individual cases in the study.

Different ways of recording and registering both ethnicity and absence levels also made it difficult to find comparable secondary data for England and the Netherlands. However, although categories on these variables were different in the two countries, the data did make a broad comparison still valuable. The data in the reports and ASSETS were also secondary data (although not publicly available). They were obtained by a professional from the RVDK/or the youth probation service in Rotterdam and from the YOT in Portsmouth. Because, in the Netherlands, the purpose of the reports was to give a sentence advise to the judge, both young people and their parents might not have spoken the truth to in order to get a milder sentence. This could impact on the validity of the research. Moreover, 'inter-rater reliability' of the professionals who perform the assessments and write the reports and ASSETS could have an influence. Even though assessments instruments were used by the professionals, the researcher has to acknowledge when collecting and analysing the data that not every professional will judge a situation similarly which will impact on the report/ASSET they write.

The researcher has conducted the case file analysis in both countries, which means that there were no problems with the 'inter-rater reliability' of the researcher. However where some of the propositions on the instrument used were factual (like parents are separated), interpretation was necessary for others (for example: there are financial problems within the family) (See Appendix A for the full instrument). To prevent differences in interpretation, most variables were described in detail. Yet, for some variables there were only a few case files with enough information available to make a sound judgement on this variable. These variables were not used in the data analysis. Another problem with the available data is that for some of the serious or persistent absentees not much follow-up information was available. If a young person commits a new offence a new report/ASSET is created and the Dutch youth probation service writes a final report when their guidance ends, but no new information was available for young people who did not (re)offend or in the Netherlands were not sentenced to youth probation. This means that follow-up information was almost always available for the more serious cases (for example prolific offenders) who might be less likely to obtain positive outcomes, and not for the less serious cases. It is likely that this has impacted on the results of the research in relation to the short-term outcomes (especially obtaining a qualification and having employment).

In this respect, it is unfortunate that interviewing young people themselves (about 5 years after their serious or persistent absence case) did not work out. This could have given valuable information about how they experienced the government response, how their lives developed after the information in the case files stopped and what they believe was or would have been an effective response in their situation. It also would have given the opportunity to discover more about those young people for whom there was no follow-up information available in the case files.

The original intention of the project was also to analyse the effectiveness of the different responses in England and the Netherlands. Yet, the complexity of serious or persistent absence from school indicates that many factors at different levels of the ecological system's theory impact on the serious or persistent absence from school. The research had to be conducted in the real world and it was not possible to use an experimental design, which makes it hard to assess the effectiveness of different responses to the young person and/or the parents, because a change in the situation of the young person could be attributed to the response but could also be the result of an unrelated change in one of the other factors.

Because the researcher is aware of the limitations of the available data and clearly specifies what can be measured with the available data and research methods, the internal validity of the research is good. Yet, although Portsmouth and Rotterdam were selected deliberately as case studies, it is not clear whether other cities in both countries respond to serious or persistent absence from school in the same manner. Furthermore, in other parts of each of the countries different groups might be affected and be more likely to become serious or persistent absentees, which means that the characteristics of the serious or persistent absentees in Portsmouth and Rotterdam are not necessarily similar to those in the rest of the respective countries. This means that the results of the research cannot be generalised to the whole country per se, although there are no clear indications that the situation is very different in Portsmouth and Rotterdam compared to England and the Netherlands respectively.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

As was pointed out in Chapter 1, both the theoretical framework that was adopted and the chosen research design had to be suitable to deal with a wicked problem. The combination of the use of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (which acknowledged the influence of factors at different levels on serious or persistent absence from school), and a flexible research design, (which allowed for the use of multiple research methods to actually find information on the impact of different variables at all these levels) seemed very suitable. Yet, it was not only the complexity of serious or persistent absence from school that meant a flexible design was needed. Because the aim of the research is to compare the approach in two countries, a comparative study had to be developed. And since it is difficult to find comparable data and information for the two countries, the design and the researcher had to be flexible in this respect as well. The chosen flexible research design, in which a multiple mixed-methods approach was adopted, was thus the best way to conduct this research. This did not mean, however, that there were not still considerable challenges both related to comparing two different countries and to researching such a complex and wicked problem as serious or persistent absence from school.

## **Chapter 5: Similarities and differences between Dutch and English serious or persistent absentees**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The main aim of this chapter is to identify the differences and similarities between serious or persistent absentees within the same and between the two countries. To assess this, the vulnerability and offending behaviour of the persistent absentees is taken into account whilst looking at the determining risk factors for the serious or persistent absentees in each country. In order to demonstrate the complexity of serious or persistent absence from school Bronfenbrenner's ecological system (See Chapter 1 Figure 3) is used. The risk factors that absentees experience at different levels of the ecological system will be set out, in both the English and the Dutch samples. In order to discover whether absentees differ depending on their level of vulnerability and offending behaviour, groups based on the intersecting offending behaviour/vulnerability continua (See Chapter 4 Figure 8) will be created and used in this chapter. The data that are used in this chapter were collected from the case files of Dutch and English serious or persistent absentees. This means that the information in this chapter is based on what professionals in both countries recorded about a young person after they completed an assessment. The fact that this chapter is based on secondary data also has consequences for the chosen factors to compare the serious or persistent absentees from both countries on. For some variables, it was possible to find information in one country but not in the other. For example, in England the use of free school meals is registered and often used as a poverty indicator, but there is no equivalent of that in the Netherlands. Chapter 3, however, does use OECD data to provide an understanding of different levels of inequality and poverty between England and the Netherlands.

The chapter will start with some general sample characteristics from both countries, such as sex, age and ethnicity. It will then discuss the offending behaviour and vulnerability of the absentees and make those variables dichotomous in order to create four different groups based on the intersecting vulnerability/offending behaviour continua. Then risk factors (See Farrington's risk and protective factors paradigm, Chapter 1) at different levels for the distinct groups will be discussed, starting from the inner circle of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system by providing details at the individual level. Hereafter, differences and similarities between Dutch and English persistent and serious absentees in the number and type of risk factors they experience in their family, at school and with their peers (so different microsystems) will be provided. Then the impact of specific mesosystems will be described. Regarding exosystems, the legal response to the absentees' parents and (in the Netherlands) persistent absentees themselves will be described. Macrosystem factors

were already discussed in the comparative chapter (See Chapter 3) and will therefore not be addressed in this chapter. Finally, short-term outcomes for the absentees will be discussed in relation to both the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour and the legal response to the parents and/or the persistent absentees.

## **5.2 Sampling, age, gender and ethnicity**

The total number of young people included in this study was 518. In the Netherlands, a sample of 225 serious absentees – who had been taken to court between April 2009 and November 2009 because of their absence from school – was drawn from a database of the RVDK (location Rotterdam). In England samples were drawn from the YOT database (110 absentees), the EIA (110 absentees) and the persistent absentees in the C&C database (73 young people). The total number of serious or persistent absentees included in the study in England was 293 (See Chapter 4 for more information on the selection of the samples). For the English serious or persistent absentees in the EIA and C&C samples, there was not enough information available for some variables, which means that in this chapter it is often only the English YOT sample that will be compared to the Dutch sample. All the absentees in the English YOT sample have committed at least one offence, so only using this English sample can have an impact on the results presented in this chapter. It might not only lead to a higher average of committed offences, but it can also affect other characteristics of the absentees. It could, for example, increase the likelihood of English absentees exhibiting more externalising behaviour problems compared to the Dutch serious or persistent absentees.

### **5.2.1 Gender**

The majority of persistent absentees included in the sample were male (60.8%) in England and 56.4% in the Netherlands) (see Table 13). The ratio male versus female in both countries was about 6 to 4. In England slightly more males were included in the sample compared to the Netherlands. This could be due to the different sampling method; in the Netherlands the absentees were selected on the basis of their absence, whereas the young people in the YOT sample in England could only have been included if they had committed at least one crime. A chi-square test confirms an association between the different samples (YOT, EIA or C&C) and gender in England:  $\chi^2 (2, N = 291) = 11.858, p = 0.003$ . Absentees in the YOT sample (who were all offenders) were more likely to be males and young people in the EIA sample were more likely to be females.

**Table 13. Gender division of the absentees in the English and Dutch samples**

	England		The Netherlands	
	number	%	number	%
Male	177	60.8	127	56.4
Female	114	39.2	98	43.6
Missing	2		0	
Total	293		225	

### 5.2.2 Age

It was practically impossible to pinpoint the exact age at which the serious school absence had started in both countries. So, whilst the age will be discussed further, it is simply descriptive in the context of the different samples. In the Netherlands, the age was taken at the time the young person had to appear in court because of the persistent absence from school, but in some cases this was not the first time they were taken to court because of their serious absence from school. Therefore, some of the absentees were much younger when their absence from school started. In addition, once the serious or persistent absentee was taken to court, the problem had already developed. So, the absence from school must have started at a younger age.

In England age was calculated differently for each of the different samples. For the YOT sample, in most cases the age of the young person in the first ASSET was taken. Only when it was clear that the absence problems of the young person started only in a later ASSET, the age in this later ASSET was used. There were, however, also young people for whom it states in the ASSET that there were serious absence problems in year 8, but the first ASSET was when the young person was not in compulsory education anymore. In these cases, because the exact age at the start of the absence problems was not clear, still the age at the time of the first ASSET was used. For the EIA sample, the age of the young person at 1 September 2010 was calculated. This date was chosen, because this was the end of the academic year in which they were persistently absent from school. But again, some of them might have already been seriously absent from school in years previous to this academic year. Finally, for the C&C sample, the age at the start of the project was taken. It is, however, also possible that the absence problems for young people in this sample started only in the last year of the project, and therefore, they may be actually have been a bit older when their persistent or serious absence from school started.

In the Netherlands, the average age of the absentees was 15.65 years. In England, the average age was 13.55 years. There are three possible explanations for this difference. Firstly, the age of criminal responsibility in The Netherlands is 12, compared to 10 in England. Consequently,

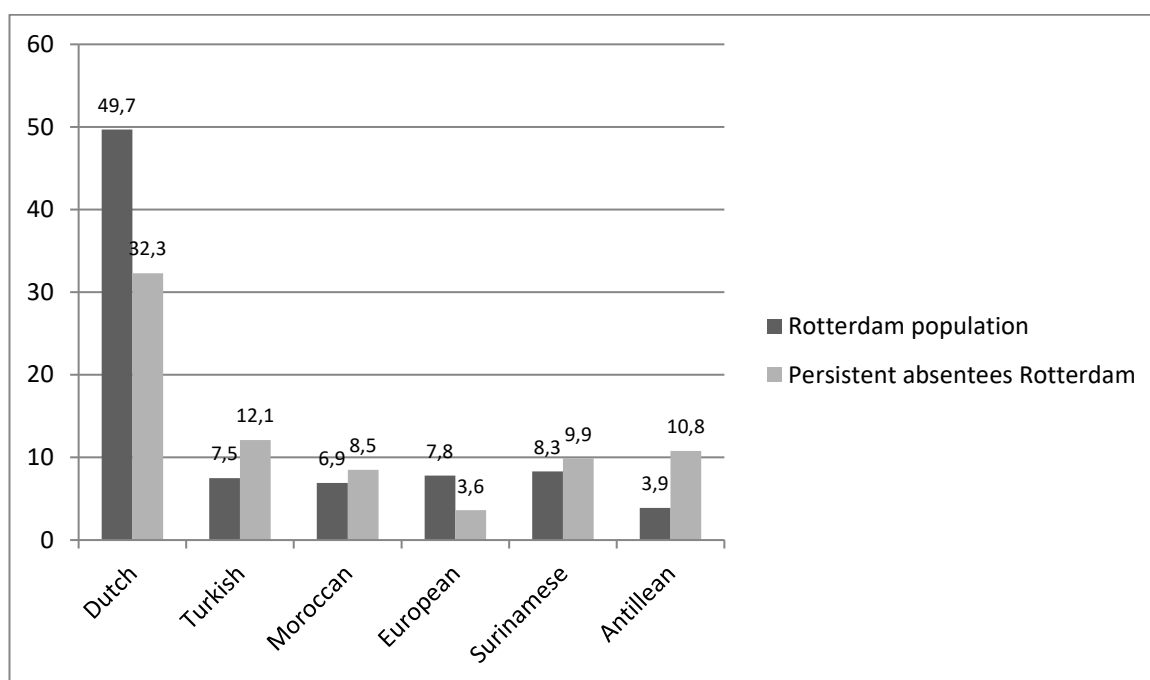
the minimum age for a young person to be included in the Dutch sample was 12, whereas young people in the YOT sample in England could be 10. This means that young people who are committing crimes will come to the attention of the justice system (an exosystem, See Chapter 1 Figure 3 for Bronfenbrenner's ecological system) at a younger age in England. This could also lead to earlier involvement of other services, such as social welfare services, and more attention being drawn towards the schooling of the young person. Secondly, the minimum age in the C&C sample was even lower (4.5), due to absentees who were taken into care being included in this sample. Finally, all serious or persistent absentees in the Dutch sample were taken to court because of their absence, whereas this was not the case for the English sample (also not all parents were taken to court), which means the absence of the Dutch students might have already been even more serious and therefore they may have been older on average.

### **5.2.3 Ethnicity**

Table 14 and Table 15 illustrate the ethnicity of the serious absentees in each of the cities. The ethnicity of Dutch absentees was determined based on the country of birth of their parents. The vast majority of the absentees in Portsmouth were white British (78.7%), whereas only 32.3 percent of the absentees in Rotterdam were Dutch. Figure 9 and 10 show the ethnicity of the persistent absentees in the samples in each city compared to the ethnicity of the whole population in the same city. The different trends seem to be even bigger in comparison to the population ethnicity: Considerably fewer absentees in the sample were Dutch compared to the ethnic profile of Rotterdam, and considerably more of the absentees in Portsmouth were White British/European compared to the ethnicity of the population in Portsmouth (See Figure 9 and Figure 10). All other ethnic groups in Rotterdam (apart from the Europeans) seemed to be overrepresented among the serious or persistent absentees. The mixed and other group had to be taken out of Figure 9 for Rotterdam, because those groups were not distinguished in the Statline database of the CBS (See Chapter 3 Table 7). This means that the cumulative percentage of the different bars in Figure 9 is only 84.1 percent for the Rotterdam population compared to 77.2 percent for the serious or persistent absentees in Rotterdam. In Rotterdam, especially Antillean and Turkish young people seemed to be more likely to become serious or persistent absentees (See Figure 9). In Portsmouth there were no Asian absentees in the sample, whilst 6.1 percent of the total population is Asian (See Figure 10). This indicates that Asian young people were less likely to become serious or persistent absentees in Portsmouth.

**Table 14. The ethnicity of the serious or persistent absentees in the sample in Rotterdam**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Dutch	72	32.3
Mixed	31	13.9
Turkish	27	12.1
Antillean	24	10.8
Surinamese	22	9.9
Other Non-European	20	9.0
Moroccan	19	8.5
European	8	3.6
Total	223	100.0

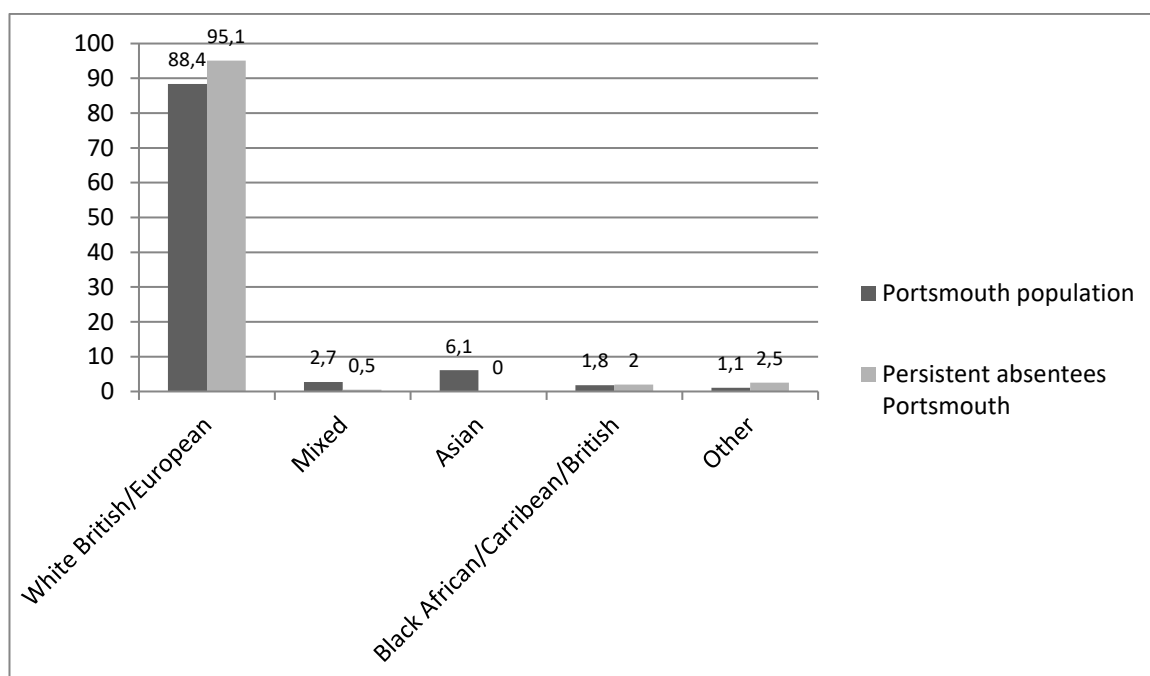


**Figure 9: Ethnicity of the population in Rotterdam compared to the serious or persistent absentees in the sample**



**Table 15. The ethnicity of the serious or persistent absentees in the sample in Portsmouth**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
White British	159	78.7
White European	33	16.3
Other	5	2.5
Caribbean	2	1.0
Mixed	1	0.5
Black European	1	0.5
Black British	1	0.5
Total	202	100.0



**Figure 10: Ethnicity of the population in Portsmouth compared to the serious or persistent absentees in the sample**

In conclusion, the different ethnic structure of the Portsmouth and Rotterdam population, seems to be even more pronounced in the samples for this research project. Whereas the non-British population in Portsmouth seems to be underrepresented in the sample of serious or persistent absentees, the non-Dutch population in Rotterdam seems to be overrepresented. This indicates that the ethnic minority groups in Portsmouth are less likely than the British population in Portsmouth (especially the Asians, see Figure 10) to become serious or persistent absentees, whereas the ethnic minority groups in Rotterdam (apart from the Europeans, see Figure 9) are more likely to become serious or persistent absentees compared to the Dutch population in Rotterdam. The different ethnic structure of the two cities, therefore, affects which groups are becoming

serious or persistent absentees (and part of the sample for this research), and will therefore also impact on which risk factors will be present among the serious or persistent absentees in the two countries in this research.

### **5.3 The offending behaviour and vulnerability intersecting continua**

The research evidence indicated that serious or persistent absentees differ in both the amount of offending behaviour and their vulnerability (See Chapter 2). These variables can both be viewed as a continuum. Depending on their level of vulnerability and offending behaviour, all absentees can be allocated to one of the quadrants in Figure 8 in Chapter 4. The quadrants were, therefore, used to form four different groups which can be used to characterise and compare the absentees in the English and Dutch samples. The use of these four groups means that the influence of the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour can be explored. The four groups are:

1. Low vulnerability/low offending behaviour
2. Primarily offending behaviour
3. Primarily vulnerability
4. High vulnerability/high offending behaviour

In order to allocate each absentee to one of the groups, they were divided into high or low offending and high or low vulnerability groups (so these continuous variables had to be made dichotomous). The next section will describe the offending behaviour of both the Dutch and English absentees in more detail. It will also explain how each absentee was categorised as either low or high offending behaviour.

#### **5.3.1 Offending behaviour**

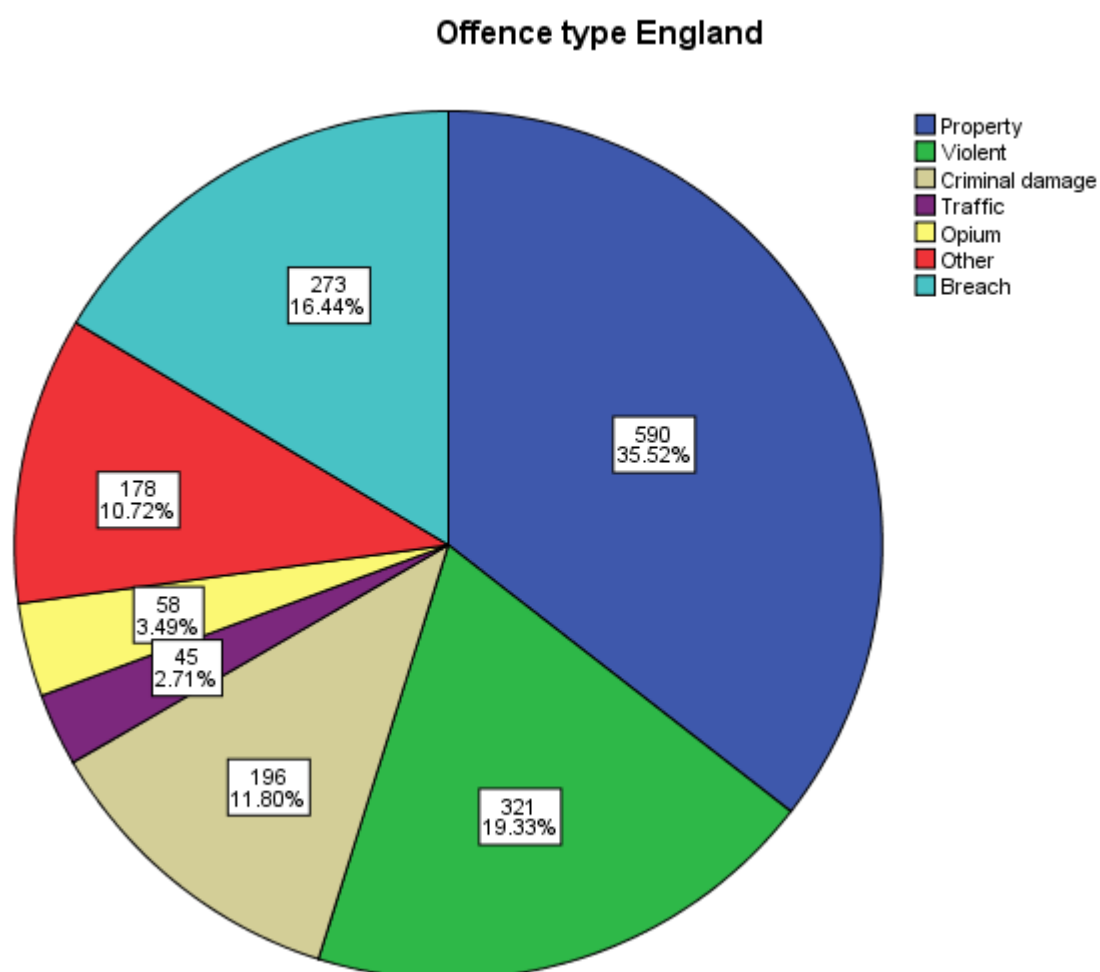
The type and volume of offending behaviour varies between all absentees, but there also seem to be some country-specific differences. The average number of recorded offences committed by the Dutch absentees (1.14) was much lower than that of the English absentees (11.80). Furthermore, the maximum number of offences committed by one person was much higher in England. There is a variety of possible explanations for this large difference. First of all, the young people in the Netherlands were selected on the basis of their persistent absence from school, whereas in England 110 young people (the YOT sample) could only become part of the sample if they had committed at least one offence. Furthermore, it is possible that prolific offenders in the Netherlands, who were also serious absentees would not have been taken to court because of their absence from school and thereby had no chance to be included in the sample for this research project. Second, the age of criminal responsibility is lower in England (10 compared to 12 in the Netherlands), which means that crimes can be registered from a younger age. Finally, there is a difference in the way crimes

were recorded in each country. For example, breaches of an order are considered a ‘new’ offence in the UK and not in the Netherlands. Taking all this into account the higher average number of offences in England is not surprising, however, the size of the difference also suggests a real difference between the number of crimes the serious or persistent absentees in England committed compared to absentees in the Netherlands (See Table 16).

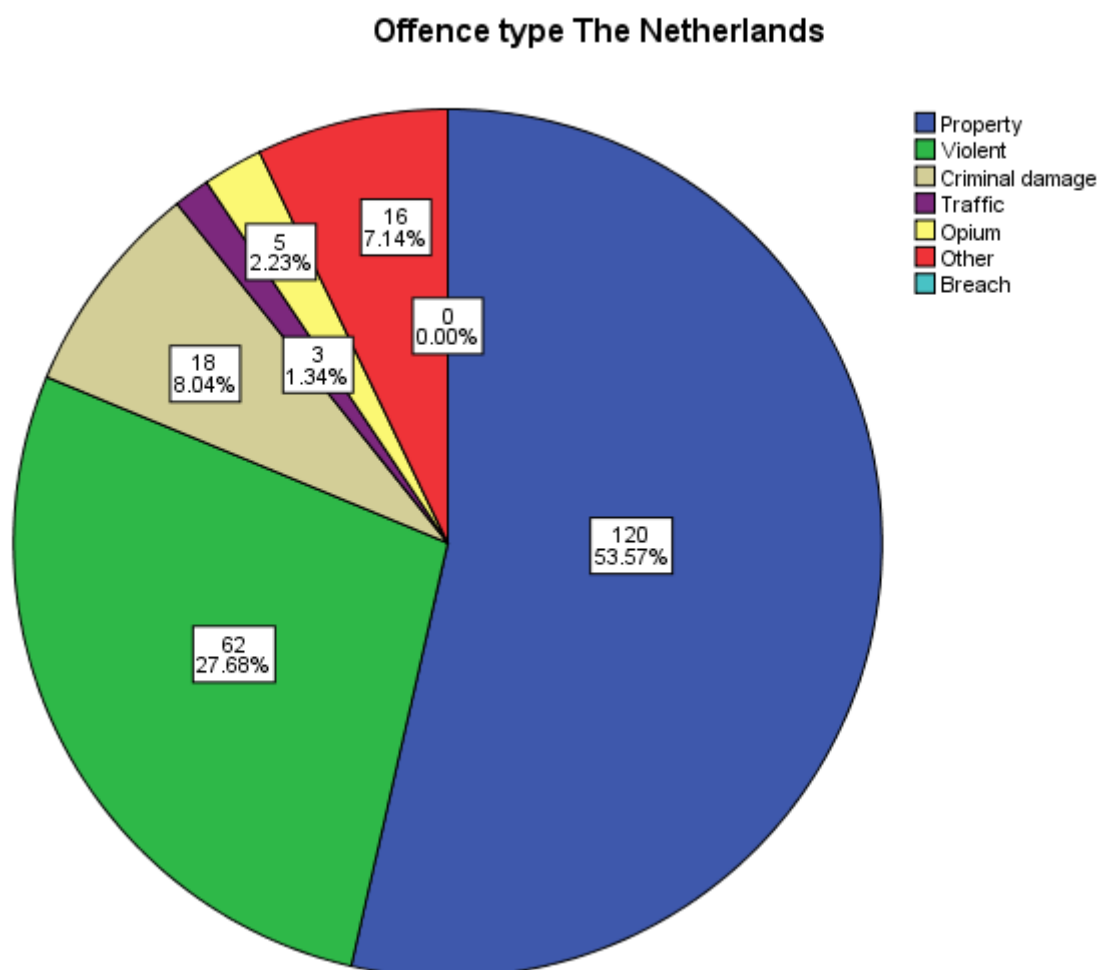
**Table 16. Descriptive statistics of the number of offences absentees in the Dutch and English sample committed**

	<b>Average number of offences</b>	<b>minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>
<b>England (N=183)</b>	11.80	0	80	15.12
<b>Netherlands (N=225)</b>	1.14	0	14	1.87

So, table 16 indicates a difference in the amount of offences English and Dutch serious or persistent absentees commit. The type of offences the absentees commit might also differ between the two countries. Figures 11 and 12, therefore, give an overview of the different types of offences that were committed by the absentees in England and the Netherlands respectively. These pie charts show that in the Netherlands the breaches of an order were not registered as a new offence, whilst in England 16.44 percent of the committed offences were the breach of an order. The division of the offences is quite similar; i.e. in both countries property crimes were the type of offence that was committed the most and this was followed by violent crimes. However, in the Netherlands over half of the committed offences were property crimes (53.57%), whereas in England this was only 35.52 per cent (even when breaches were not considered offences anymore to make it more comparable to the Netherlands, a lower percentage (42.51%) of the offences in England were property crimes compared to the Netherlands). Finally, figures 11 and 12 indicate that in England more opium, traffic and other offences were committed than in the Netherlands.



**Figure 11:** The types of offences committed by the English serious or persistent absentees



**Figure 12:** The type of offences committed by the Dutch serious or persistent absentees

To discover whether there is a connection between the level of offending of an absentee and some factors at the individual level or at the microsystem-level, the absentees were placed in groups based on the number of offences committed. Young people who did not commit any offence were placed in the *no offending* group in each country. In the Netherlands the *low offending* group consists of young people who committed only 1 offence, *medium offending* group 2 or 3 offences and the *high offending* group 4 or more offences. In England, young people who committed 1 to 4 offences were placed in the *low offending* group, 5 to 15 the *medium offending* group and 16 or more the *high offending* group. Hence, the *level of offending* groups were created relative to the average number of offences committed in the country of the young person.

Table 17 provides an overview of the age, sex, care, custody and family status of the different offending groups, which are factors at the individual and family level. Looking at age, the absentees in the *high offending* group seemed to be slightly younger than the other offenders in both countries. It is not surprising that in England the *no offending* group was by far the youngest,

because young people under 10 in the care and custody sample all had to be part of this group (because the age of criminal responsibility is 10 in England). Regarding sex, the percentage of males in each group increased as the level of offending increased; in both countries there were very few females (less than 15%) who can be seen as prolific offenders. In England, the *no offending* group also consisted of a majority of males (63.6%), whereas in the Dutch *no offending* group females constitute the majority (55.3%). The data for care indicate that the percentage of young people who committed at least one offence and had ever been in care was fairly similar in both countries. In England there did not seem to be a clear link between ever been in care and the level of offending. In contrast, in the Netherlands the chance that a young person had ever been in care increased with higher levels of offending. Differences also exist between England and the Netherlands when it comes to the relation between offending behaviour and having been in custody. A much higher percentage (72.3%) of the English *high offending* group has ever been in custody compared to the Dutch *high offending* group (55.6%). Interestingly, three of the Dutch absentees in the *no offending* group have been in custody. These young people probably failed to complete a community service sentence (which they received because of their persistent absence from school), and were sent to prison as a substitute sentence. Finally, there did not seem to be a clear connection between the level of offending and the family situation (i.e. separation of parents and number of siblings) of the young people in both countries.

**Table 17. Individual and family factors for the four groups based on the level of offending**

		No offending		Low offending		Medium offending		High offending	
		ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL
<b>Totals per category</b>	N	<b>33</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>18</b>
	%	<b>18%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>Age (M)</b>	M	8.43	15.66	14.10	15.64	14.20	15.66	13.96	15.57
<b>Male</b>	N	21	51	29	31	33	28	41	17
	% WG <sup>1</sup>	<b>17%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>13%</b>
	% BG <sup>2</sup>	64%	45%	56%	58%	65%	70%	87%	94%
<b>Female</b>	N	12	63	23	22	18	12	6	1
	% WG <sup>1</sup>	<b>20%</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>1%</b>
	% BG <sup>2</sup>	36%	55%	44%	42%	35%	30%	13%	6%
<b>Care</b>	N	33	43	21	20	18	16	25	10
	% CAT <sup>3</sup>	100%	38%	40%	38%	35%	40%	53%	56%
<b>Custody</b>	N	0	4	3	4	4	4	34	10
	% CAT <sup>3</sup>	0%	4%	6%	8%	8%	10%	72%	56%
<b>Parents separated</b>	N	16	77	41	40	46	22	36	12
	% CAT <sup>3</sup>	48%	68%	79%	75%	90%	55%	77%	67%
<b>Siblings (M)</b>	M	1.73	2.25	2.20	2.10	2.39	1.73	2.38	2.67

<sup>1</sup> = within groups - division of males and females over categories per country

<sup>2</sup> = between groups - division of males and females per category per country

<sup>3</sup> = percentage per category per country

In order to place the young people in one of the quadrants of the intersecting offending behaviour and vulnerability continua, the offending behaviour variable had to be made dichotomous (i.e. either low or high offending behaviour). Therefore, all absentees in the *no* and *low offending* groups were allocated to a *low offending behaviour* group and all absentees in the *medium and high offending* groups were allocated to a *high offending behaviour* group. But to place the absentees in one of the quadrants of the intersecting vulnerability and offending behaviour continua, the vulnerability of each absentee also had to be established. The next section will discuss the level of vulnerability of the absentees and set out how the young people were divided into high and low vulnerability groups.

### 5.3.2 Vulnerability

The level of vulnerability of a young person is much harder to assess than the level of offending behaviour. Vulnerability can exist at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system (See Chapter 1 Figure 3 and Chapter 2). Some people might be very vulnerable due to individual factors (such as behavioural problems, emotional disorders or learning difficulties), whereas others may have problematic family circumstances (such as parents who are ill or experience drugs/alcohol

problems, financial problems at home or many conflicts within the family) which makes them vulnerable. As was already set out in section 2.2.4 the variable 'taken into care' will be used as vulnerability indicator in this research project, because children who have been taken into care belong to the most vulnerable children (Hayden & Jenkins, 2015). So, young people who have been taken into care are placed in the *high vulnerability* group and young people who have not been taken into care in the *low vulnerability* group. This means that the emphasis to establish vulnerability might be more on the family level of Bronfenbrenner's theory, although the behaviour of the young person might also impact on the ability of the family to cope (See Bandura's model of reciprocal determinism, Chapter 1 Figure 4).

Children in the *care* group generally started their serious absence from school at a younger age than children in the *never been in care* group. Although the difference between the two groups is much larger in England, the difference is significant for both countries (NL:  $t(223)=-2.97, p=0.003$ ; ENG:  $t(140.44)=-8.156, p<0.001$ ). In both countries, boys were in the majority in both the *care* and *never been in care* group. A larger part of the English sample has ever been in care, and in both countries there was no significant association between gender and being taken into care. In England around 20 percent of the young people in both the *care* group and the *never been in care* group had ever been in custody. This percentage was much lower in the Netherlands, but a higher percentage of the young people in the Dutch *care* group had ever been in custody compared to the serious absentees in the *never been in care* group. In the Netherlands there was a clear association between having separated parents and being taken into care (chi-square (1, N=225) = 5.762,  $p=0.016$ ). This indicates that serious or persistent absentees with separated parents were more likely to have ever been in care compared to persistent or serious absentees whose parents were still together. In England there was no association between persistent absentees been taken into care and the separation of parents (chi-square (1, N=204) = 0.970,  $p=0.325$ ). In both countries, the average number of siblings of young people who had been in care compared to those who had never been in care was fairly similar (See Table 18).



**Table 18. Individual and family factors for absentees who had been taken into care and those who had not been taken into care**

		Care				Not in care			
		ENG N=100		NL N=89		ENG N=104		NL N=136	
		% WG <sup>1</sup>	% BG <sup>2</sup>	% WG <sup>1</sup>	% BG <sup>2</sup>	% WG <sup>1</sup>	% BG <sup>2</sup>	% WG <sup>1</sup>	% BG <sup>2</sup>
<b>Age</b>	M	11.7		15.4		14.6		15.8	
<b>Male</b>	N	67	67.0	46	51.7	70	67.3	81	59.6
			48.9		36.2		51.1		63.8
<b>Female</b>	N	33	33.0	43	48.3	34	32.7	55	40.4
			49.3		43.9		50.7		56.1
<b>Custody</b>	N	20	20.0	16	18.0	21	20.2	6	4.4
<b>Parents</b>	N	74	74.0	68	76.4	83	79.8	83	61.0
<b>separated</b>									
<b>Siblings</b>	M	2.2		2.3		2.2		2.1	

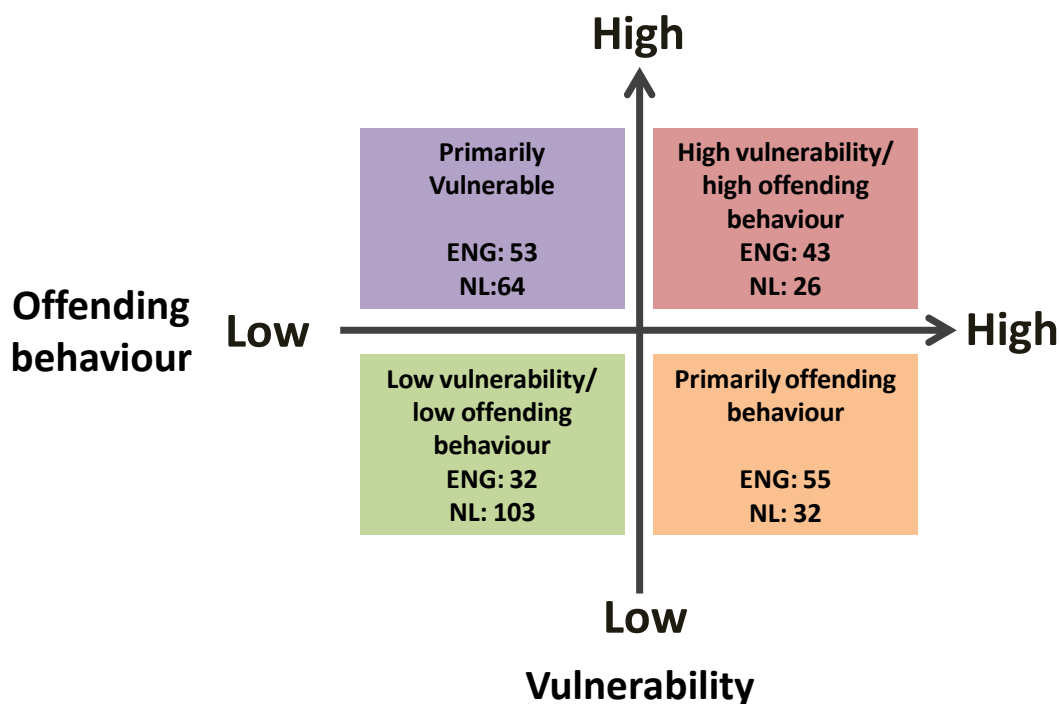
<sup>1</sup> = within groups - division of males and females over categories per country

<sup>2</sup> = between groups - division of males and females per category per country

For the placement in one of the quadrants of the intersecting vulnerability and offending behaviour continua, young people in the care group were considered *highly vulnerable* and young people who had not been taken into care were placed in a *low vulnerability* group.

### 5.3.3 The combined vulnerability and offending behaviour groups

With a score on both offending behaviour and vulnerability, all absentees logically fall in one of the four quadrants displayed in Figure 13. Absentees that scored low on both offending behaviour and vulnerability were placed in the green quadrant: the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group. The orange quadrant represents absentees who showed *primarily offending behaviour*; high offending behaviour but low vulnerability absentees were placed in this group. The purple *primarily vulnerable* quadrant consisted of all absentees classified as highly vulnerable but who displayed low offending behaviour. Finally, absentees that scored high on both offending behaviour and vulnerability were placed in the red quadrant: the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* group (See Figure 13). Figure 13 shows that more English absentees were classified as high on offending behaviour compared to Dutch absentees, which resulted in a large Dutch *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group and a relatively small Dutch *primarily offending behaviour* group. In England, only the absentees in the YOT and the C&C sample could be placed in the window, because for the EIA sample there were no data about the number of offences.



**Figure 13:** The placement of absentees in each country on the intersecting vulnerability/offending behaviour continua

In the next sections, these groups will be used to discover whether there were differences between absentees within each country in the problems they experience at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and to establish whether these groups were affected by similar risk factors in each country.

## 5.4 Individual factors

This section describes individual factors for the different groups of absentees in each country. These are factors within the inner circle of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system that might impact on the serious or persistent absence from school. Table 19 shows the gender, age and ethnicity division over each of the groups. In the Netherlands, there was a significant association between gender and *vulnerability and offending behaviour* group (chi-square (3, N=225) = 17.249,  $p=0.001$ ). Females were more likely to be *primarily vulnerable* than males. In England, there was no association between gender and *vulnerability and offending behaviour* group (chi-square (3, N=183) = 5.862,  $p=0.119$ ). The absentees in the English *primarily vulnerable* group were much younger on average than in the other groups, because a large number of young people from the care and custody sample (starting at the age of 4) were included in this group. Much more absentees in Portsmouth

were white British compared to absentees in Rotterdam being Dutch. This corresponds with the population figures for Portsmouth and Rotterdam (See Chapter 3).

**Table 19. The gender, age and ethnicity division for each of the groups of absentees**

		Low vulnerability/low offending behaviour		Primarily Offending behaviour		Primarily vulnerable		High vulnerability/High Offending behaviour	
		ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL
		N= 32	N =103	N =55	N =32	N =53	N =64	N = 43	N =26
<b>Gender</b>	<b>M</b>	19 (59.4%)	56 (54.4%)	41 (74.5%)	25 (78.1)	31 (58.5%)	26 (40.6%)	33 (76.7%)	20 (56.4%)
	<b>F</b>	13 (40.6%)	47 (45.6%)	14 (25.5%)	7 (21.9%)	22 (41.5%)	38 (59.4%)	10 (23.3%)	6 (43.6%)
<b>Age</b>		14.82	15.86	14.48	15.69	10.13	15.33	13.59	15.56
<b>Ethnicity<sup>1</sup></b>		23	36	33	10	48	20	34	6
<b>(NL = Dutch)</b>		(71.9%)	(35.0%)	(60.0%)	(31.3%)	(90.6%)	(31.7%)	(82.9%)	(24.0%)
<b>(ENG = White British)</b>									

<sup>1</sup>For the Netherlands there were two missing data on the variable ethnicity. This means that N(prim. vuln)=63, and N(high/high)=25.

Table 20 shows the prevalence of specific risk factors at the individual level that were recorded by professionals in the case files of the serious or persistent absentees, like having mental, physical, or sleep problems and drug use, for the four groups in both countries. These specific risk factors were ordered from top to bottom from most prevalent to least prevalent in the whole sample (both countries combined). Sleep problems was the most prevalent individual risk factor for all groups and countries combined (44.8%). The sleep problems among the absentees ranged from lying in bed unable to fall asleep to going to bed late and therefore being unable to get out of bed on time. In all cases, however, the serious or persistent absentee mentioned the sleep problem to the professional as a reason for the absence from school. In many cases, it was an argument for repeatedly turning up late for school, but some young people also explained that their sleep problems led to tiredness and this in turn led to not attending school at all on some days. Having sleep problems was a much bigger issue for the Dutch absentees compared to the English absentees (See Table 20).

A higher percentage of Dutch serious or persistent absentees was identified as having a behaviour disorder compared to the English absentees. The most common behaviour disorders among the serious or persistent absentees were attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorder (CD) and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). In both countries, behaviour disorders were most prevalent among the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* absentees and least prevalent among the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* absentees. Furthermore, behaviour disorders were also common among the *primarily offending* absentees, which is not surprising given that some of the behaviour disorders are related to displaying externalising behaviour problems which might lead to violent offences (See Table 20).

The variable mental health problems includes anxiety, performance anxiety and depression. There were also some absentees who were reported to suffer from more than one of these mental health issues. In total, 35.5 percent of the absentees were dealing with at least one mental health problem according to the case files. Slightly more English absentees were struggling with their mental health compared to Dutch absentees. In the Netherlands, mental health problems were most frequent among the *primarily vulnerable* absentees and clearly least common among the *primarily offending* group. Dutch absentees in the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group were more likely to suffer from mental health problems than the absentees in the Dutch *primarily offending* group. In England, on the other hand, mental health problems were actually least present among the *primarily vulnerable* absentees (although the N for this group was only 5), which was the highest affected group in the Netherlands. Thus even though in both countries mental health problems constituted a risk factor that many persistent and serious absentees had to cope with, which groups of absentees were affected most differed considerably (See Table 20).

Both soft and hard drugs use seemed to be a much more ubiquitous problem among the English absentees than the Dutch absentees (See Table 20). In England, a very high percentage of serious or persistent absentees in both the *primarily offending* group and the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* group was using soft drugs, and almost one in three in the latter group was also using hard drugs. This suggests that the use of soft drugs and to a lesser degree hard drugs is a major problem for those absentees that were also prolific offenders. Although the prevalence in the Dutch sample was much lower, the trend was very similar to England: i.e. absentees who were considered *high offenders* were more likely to use soft drugs.

Having physical health problems was a less often discussed individual risk factor in the case files of the whole sample (both countries combined). Still, 16.1 percent of the absentees was having physical health problems, but only the use of hard drugs (7.2%) was less common. One in four of the Dutch *primarily vulnerable* absentees was identified as having one or more physical health problems (See Table 20). Some examples of physical health problems present among the serious or

persistent absentees are migraines, asthma, anaemia and Pfeiffer's disease. These physical problems were reported to cause the young person to miss whole school days, which often resulted in falling behind at school, which then led to progression of the absence from school.

In conclusion, at the individual level in England most risk factors were least common among the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group and most common among the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* group. This is probably in line with what one would expect. Against expectations, however, Table 20 clearly demonstrates a much more complex picture for the relationship between offending behaviour, vulnerability and individual risk factors in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, the *primarily offending* group seemed to be the least affected by some of the risk factors. This is especially true for the more internalising risk factors such as sleep problems and mental health problems. Similarly remarkable is the finding that the Dutch *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* scored relatively high on many of the individual risk factors, and only scored lowest on behaviour disorders and hard drugs (note that for hard drugs the lowest percentage (0%) was shared with two other groups). These findings seem to indicate that in this Dutch group, absentees did experience individual problems, which did cause their absence from school but which did not lead to being taken into care or offending behaviour.

Table 20. The presence of individual risk factors for each of the groups of absentees

	Low vulnerability/low offending behaviour		Primarily Offending behaviour		Primarily vulnerable		High vulnerability/High Offending behaviour	
	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL
	N= 30	N =103	N =46	N =32	N =5	N =64	N = 29	N =26
<b>Sleep problems</b>	5 (16.7%)	69 (67.0%)	8 (17.4%)	13 (40.6%)	2 (40.0%)	37 (57.8%)	3 (10.3%)	13 (50.0%)
<b>Behaviour disorder</b>	8 (26.7%)	27 (26.2%)	14 (30.4%)	19 (59.4%)	2 (40.0%)	35 (54.7%)	16 (55.2%)	20 (76.9%)
<b>Mental Health problems</b>	8 (26.7%)	34 (33.0%)	16 (34.8%)	5 (15.6%)	1 (20.0%)	27 (42.2%)	19 (65.5%)	9 (34.6%)
<b>Soft drugs</b>	12 (40.0%)	5 (4.9%)	38 (82.6%)	4 (12.5%)	3 (60.0%)	3 (4.7%)	26 (89.7%)	2 (7.7%)
<b>Physical Health problems</b>	2 (6.7%)	24 (23.3%)	5 (10.9%)	4 (12.5%)	0 (0.0%)	16 (25.0%)	1 (3.4%)	2 (7.7%)
<b>Hard drugs</b>	3 (10.0%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (21.7%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (20.0%)	1 (1.6%)	9 (31.0%)	0 (0.0%)

\*yellow is lowest for NL and blue is highest; green is lowest for ENG and purple is highest.

#### Differences and similarities in individual risk factors

The first aim of this research project is to establish similarities and differences between the characteristics of Dutch and English serious or persistent absentees and to explore the influence of the level of offending and vulnerability. The results indicate that many serious or persistent absentees, especially in the Netherlands, experience sleep problems. Substance misuse, on the other hand was more prevalent among the English serious or persistent absentees. The level of offending behaviour seems to have a large impact on the presence of behavior disorders. The level of vulnerability influenced the likelihood of experiencing mental health problems (like anxiety and depression). Finally, the results suggest that the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour affected Dutch and English absentees differently. In England, the *low offending/low vulnerability* group experienced the least risk factors at the individual level, but in the Netherlands this was only the case for the use of hard drugs and behaviour problems.

## 5.5 Microsystems

In this section, risk factors within the microsystems family, school and peers that might impact on serious or persistent absence from school will be discussed. The prevalence of the risk factors will be set out for each *vulnerability and offending behaviour* group.

### 5.5.1 Family

Table 21 shows the presence of different risk factors for absence from school within the family microsystem that were recorded in the case files of the young person. The risk factors are ordered from top to bottom from most to least present within the whole sample (both countries combined). As such, the most common risk factor was having biological parents who were separated (71.8%), and the least common risk factor was having one or more parents who had been or still were in custody (9.6%). Thus, even though this was the least frequent risk factor at the family level, almost one in ten absentees experienced a custodial sentence of one or more of their parents. This suggests that most absentees did not have to deal with just one of these risk factors, but many of them found themselves faced with an accumulation of different risk factors within their family.

There were differences between the percentage of Dutch as opposed to English absentees that experienced certain risk factors within the family. There was a significant association between country and having separated parents (chi-square (1, N=429) = 5.126,  $p=0.024$ ), with Dutch serious or persistent absentees being less likely to have separated parents than English serious or persistent absentees. Whilst in the Netherlands the more vulnerable (both the *primarily vulnerable* and the *high/high* group) absentees seemed to have separated parents more often compared to the *primarily offending* and the *low/low* group, In England the *primarily vulnerable* group seemed far less likely to have parents who had split up. This difference could be explained because the children in this group in England were much younger, which means parents would have had less time to split up. For all the other factors in Table 21 there was also a significant association between the country of the absentees and the specific variable. For all variables, apart from having one or more parents with physical health problems, English serious or persistent absentees were more likely to experience these risk factors within their family than Dutch serious or persistent absentees.

Finally, Table 21 shows the presence of the different risk factors, based on the available information in the case files, for each of the groups based on the intersecting vulnerability and offending behaviour continua. Some of the groups are too small to assess the statistical significance by using inferential statistics (like the chi-square test) of some of the differences and similarities between groups, but the percentage for each of the groups does give an indication of some differences and similarities between the groups. In both countries, more of the *highly vulnerable* absentees did witness domestic violence or suffered from other forms of abuse within the family

compared to absentees in the other groups. This confirms expectations, since it seems logical that there is a connection between this variable and being taken into care (the vulnerability indicator that was used for the division into different groups). In the Netherlands, almost all family factors were least prevalent in the *primarily offending* group apart from having parents with police involvements and having one or more parents who received a custodial sentence. In comparison, in England the *low vulnerability/ low offending behaviour* group seemed to have the lowest amount of risk factors at the family level. This seems more in line with what one would expect, but in the Netherlands the absentees in the *low/low* group might still have experienced some problems which led to their persistent absence from school, whereas for some of the absentees in the *primarily offending* group both their school absence and their offences might be caused by age-related playing up behaviour. So for some of these *primarily offending* absentees their behaviour might be adolescence related and therefore less rooted in underlying problems within the family.

In both countries, the *primarily vulnerable* and the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* groups seemed to experience the most risk factors within the family (See the blue and purple squares in Table 21). This confirms that those young people who experienced an accumulation of problems within their family were most likely to be taken into care. Especially in the Netherlands, young people who besides their vulnerability were also high offenders faced even more problems within the family. Many of the persistent and serious absentees (about one in five in England and one in four in the Netherlands) in this group had one or more parents who served time in custody.

The accumulation of risk factors within the families of many serious or persistent absentees, might not only have led directly to the onset of the serious or persistent absence from school. Many of these factors might also have an indirect impact on the young person, because of the added stress they give parents. This stress could lead to many conflicts within the family (between the parents, or between the parent and the young person and/or siblings) and a general tense atmosphere for the young person when at home. So, the indirect impact that (especially the accumulation of) different risk factors have, might also contribute towards the onset and progression of serious or persistent absence from school.



Table 21. Risk factors present at the family level for each of the groups of absentees

	Low vulnerability/low offending behaviour		Primarily Offending behaviour		Primarily vulnerable		High vulnerability/High Offending behaviour	
	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL
	N= 30	N =103	N =46	N =32	N =5	N =64	N = 29	N =26
<b>Separated parents<sup>1</sup></b>	26 (81.3%)	68 (66.0%)	43 (78.2%)	14 (43.8%)	31 (58.5%)	49 (76.6%)	39 (90.7%)	20 (76.9%)
<b>Debts/financial problems</b>	11 (36.7%)	30 (29.1%)	27 (58.7%)	6 (18.8%)	3 (60.0%)	31 (48.4%)	15 (51.7%)	11 (42.3%)
<b>Moving house often</b>	12 (40.0%)	26 (25.2%)	29 (63.0%)	3 (9.4%)	4 (80.0%)	16 (25.0%)	26 (89.7%)	11 (42.3%)
<b>Domestic violence/maltreatment</b>	9 (30.0%)	18 (17.5%)	19 (41.3%)	2 (6.3%)	4 (80.0%)	15 (23.4%)	21 (72.4%)	9 (34.6%)
<b>Physical health problems parents</b>	2 (6.7%)	24 (23.3%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (12.5%)	0 (0.0%)	22 (34.4%)	1 (3.4%)	11 (42.3%)
<b>Mental health problems parents</b>	2 (6.7%)	13 (12.6%)	10 (21.7%)	2 (6.3%)	0 (0.0%)	16 (25.0%)	11 (37.9%)	3 (11.5%)
<b>Substance abuse parents</b>	5 (16.7%)	10 (9.7%)	14 (30.4%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (80.0%)	8 (12.5%)	12 (41.4%)	4 (15.4%)
<b>Police involvements parents</b>	4 (13.3%)	5 (4.9%)	8 (17.4%)	2 (6.3%)	2 (40.0%)	6 (9.4%)	8 (27.6%)	8 (30.8%)
<b>Custody parents</b>	3 (10.0%)	3 (2.9%)	5 (10.9%)	1 (3.1%)	1 (20.0%)	3 (4.7%)	6 (20.7%)	7 (26.9%)

<sup>1</sup>The N for this variable in England is higher, because it includes both the YOT and the C&C sample (Ntotal = 183, Nlow/low=32, Nprim. off. =55, Nprim.vuln=53, Nhigh/high=43).

\*yellow is lowest for NL and blue is highest; green is lowest for ENG and purple is highest.

### *Differences and similarities in family risk factors*

The aim of this project is to explore the influence of the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour and to assess whether there are differences between Dutch and English absentees. Table 21 clearly demonstrates that English serious or persistent absentees were reported to experience more problems at the family level compared to the Dutch absentees. Furthermore, the level of vulnerability of the absentees seems to have a clear impact on the presence of family risk factors, because in both countries absentees in the *primarily vulnerable* and the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* groups experienced the most risk factors within the family.

### **5.5.2 School**

Table 22 shows the presence of different school-related risk factors, that were mentioned in the case files, for each of the groups based on the intersecting vulnerability and offending behaviour continua. Although some serious or persistent absentees end up not attending school at all anymore, the absence usually starts by missing a couple of hours and then gradually progresses to missing whole days or weeks. This suggests that some factors related to the specific school the young person was attending when the absence started or attending school more generally might have had an impact on their absence from school. Risk factors related to the specific school could be general factors for that school, but are often due to a mismatch between the specific school and the needs of the young person. The top risk factor in Table 22 (who has the highest prevalence) indicates that many serious or persistent absentees (59.7%) in both countries would rather attend a different school. There were a number of reasons the absentees gave for this. Some were related to some of the other risk factors in Table 22 such as being bullied or missing a connection with their classmates. But other arguments also came across quite often: In the Netherlands, many young people complained that they had to attend a school at a too low level and that they got bored easily because of that (See Chapter 3 for more information about the Dutch tracked school system). In England, many absentees who were attending a special school mentioned that they would rather go back to a mainstream school. Furthermore, some English and some Dutch students complained that the curriculum was not fun and too theoretical, they would much rather start a college course. In both England and the Netherlands, the *primarily offending* absentees were most often arguing that they would rather attend a different school (See Table 22). The reasons the absentees gave in the case files for not wanting to attend the specific school they were supposed to attend, therefore, suggest that the school often not fulfilled the expectations the young people had from following education.

Another risk factor at school is not doing very well and obtaining low grades. Many serious or persistent absentees (54.3%) were struggling at school to get high grades (according to the

information in the case files). In some cases, this was due to missing many lessons and therefore falling behind. Other absentees already had trouble keeping up before their absence from school started. In the Netherlands, the difference between the highest and lowest affected group was only two percent, so not doing well in school seems to be a serious problem among many Dutch absentees within all groups. In England, more absentees in the *primarily offending* and in the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* groups seemed to struggle with their performance at school (See Table 22).

The relationship with the teachers at school impacts upon the school experience of a young person. Unfortunately, many absentees (38.8%) were recorded to report having a bad relationships with one or more teachers. In both countries, the *high offenders* seemed to have problems with their teachers most often. This suggests that teachers frequently struggle to create positive relationships with young people who display more externalising behaviour problems. The bad relationship with the teacher might, therefore, be a result of the interaction between disruptive behaviour of the young person and the reaction of the teacher towards the behaviour of the young person.

More Dutch than English absentees were recorded lacking positive contacts with their peers at school. Dutch serious or persistent absentees mentioned they had to redo one or more years at school, which resulted in them being much older than their classmates. This led to them not enjoying school and therefore becoming absent more often. The *primarily vulnerable* group was most often reporting missing a connection with classmates in the Netherlands, where in England none of the five primarily vulnerable absentees mentioned this. On the other hand, the English *primarily offending* group most often complained about a lack of friends at school, while this group was least affected in the Netherlands.

About one in six (15.5%) of the absentees experienced bullying at school according to the case files. This included both physical bullying and emotional bullying. For some absentees, this was clearly the main reason for their non-attendance. They were afraid to go to school and therefore stayed at home. In other cases, the bullying was part of a number of reasons the young person gave for not attending school. The *primarily offending* group was most often bullied in England, but least often in the Netherlands. This was the other way around for the *primarily vulnerable* group. There were also seven persistent absentees who were both being bullied and bullying others themselves. In total, 9.3 percent of the serious or persistent absentees bullied other children, and in both countries most of the absentees who bullied other children were in the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* group. Bullying was second most common among absentees in the *primarily offending behaviour* group in both countries. This indicates that it were mostly absentees who were also committing many crimes who were recorded to bully other children at school.

Table 22. The presence of risk factors at school for each of the groups of absentees

	Low vulnerability/low offending behaviour		Primarily Offending behaviour		Primarily vulnerable		High vulnerability/High Offending behaviour	
	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL
	N= 30	N =103	N =46	N =32	N =5	N =64	N = 29	N =26
Rather different school	20 (66.7%)	54 (52.4%)	36 (78.3%)	22 (68.8%)	2 (40.0%)	35 (54.7%)	19 (65.5%)	12 (46.2%)
Weak performance	9 (30.0%)	60 (58.3%)	25 (54.3%)	18 (56.3%)	2 (40.0%)	37 (57.8%)	16 (55.2%)	15 (57.7%)
Bad relationship with teachers	10 (33.3%)	25 (24.3%)	23 (50.0%)	16 (50.0%)	2 (40.0%)	25 (39.1%)	11 (37.9%)	18 (69.2%)
No connection with classmates	5 (16.7%)	28 (27.2%)	13 (28.3%)	7 (21.9%)	0 (0.0%)	31 (48.4%)	8 (27.6%)	74 (32.9%)
being bullied	5 (16.7%)	12 (11.7%)	10 (21.7%)	2 (6.3%)	0 (0.0%)	15 (23.4%)	4 (13.8%)	4 (15.4%)
Learning problems	10 (33.3%)	9 (8.7%)	18 (39.1%)	5 (15.6%)	1 (20.0%)	6 <sup>1</sup> (9.5%)	10 (34.5%)	4 (15.4%)
Bullying	3 (10.0%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (13.0%)	6 (18.8%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (6.3%)	5 (17.2%)	7 (26.9%)

<sup>1</sup> There was one missing data in this group for this variable, so N=63.

\*yellow is lowest for NL and blue is highest; green is lowest for ENG and purple is highest.

### 5.5.3 Peers

The last microsystem that will be discussed in this chapter is the peers of the young person. This includes both peers of the serious or persistent absentee in the neighbourhood and peers at school. Table 23 shows the different risk factors associated with friends. The variables are ordered from top to bottom from most to least prevalent among the absentees in both countries combined. There was a significant association between all variables related to peers and country of the absentees. English serious or persistent absentees were more likely to spend a lot of time with

friends outside the house (chi-square (2, N=335) = 13.115,  $p=0.001$ ), have friends with police contacts (chi-square (3, N=335) = 122.787,  $p < 0.001$ ), and have unacademically orientated friends (chi-square (3, N=335) = 57.398,  $p < 0.001$ ) compared to Dutch serious or persistent absentees. Dutch absentees, on the other hand, were more likely to have no friends (chi-square (2, N=335) = 15.324,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The majority of the serious or persistent absentees (60.9%) spent a lot of time outside of their house with friends. In itself this is not necessarily a problem, but it was often related to not feeling safe at home and/or displaying anti-social behaviour on the streets. The absentees who also committed many crimes were most likely to spend a lot of time outside the house with friends in both countries (See Table 23). Many of the prolific offenders had also committed crimes in groups whilst they were out on the street with their peers. It is therefore also not surprising that in both countries the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* group were most often having friends with police contacts, with the *primarily offending behaviour* groups coming second. It were also the absentees in these groups who more often had unacademically orientated friends, which means they frequently left school with their friends to go to the city together or do other things whilst they were all supposed to be at school (See Table 23). In England, some young people were recorded to indicate that they were placed in a class with several students who were not very academically orientated at the special school, which increased or started their absence from school. The absence figures for Portsmouth (See Chapter 3 Table 3) show that absence levels were indeed very high at the special school in Portsmouth.

The last variable in Table 23 is actually very different to the other three, because for these absentees the problem was not that they were possibly negatively influenced by some of their peers, but that they were having no friends at all. This could lead to loneliness and mental health problems (like depression). Having a lack of friends was less common among the serious or persistent absentees than the other three variables in Table 23; 9.3 percent of the serious or persistent absentees in both countries was recorded to report having a lack of friends. The *primarily vulnerable* absentees in the Netherlands, who were experiencing the least of the other risk factors related to peers were most likely to experience a lack of friends. In conclusion, high offenders were most likely to experience risk factors related to being negatively influenced by their peers, whilst mainly vulnerable absentees were more at risk of having no friends.

Table 23. The presence of risk factors related to peers for each of the groups of absentees

	Low vulnerability/low offending behaviour		Primarily Offending behaviour		Primarily vulnerable		High vulnerability/High Offending behaviour	
	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL
	N= 30	N =103	N =46	N =32	N =5	N =64	N = 29	N =26
<b>Spends lots of time outside the house with friends</b>	12 (40.0%) )	54 (52.4%) )	39 (84.8%) )	22 (68.8%) )	2 (40.0%) )	30 (46.9%) )	22 (75.9%) )	23 (88.5%) )
<b>Police involvements with friends</b>	18 (60.0%) )	13 (12.6%) )	41 (89.1%) )	8 (25.0%) )	4 (80.0%) )	8 (12.5%) )	26 (89.7%) )	14 (53.8%) )
<b>Unacademically orientated friends</b>	9 (30.0%) )	14 (13.6%) )	27 (58.7%) )	5 (15.6%) )	1 (20.0%) )	7 (10.9%) )	21 (72.4%) )	7 (26.9%) )
<b>Lack of friends</b>	0 (0.0%) )	12 (11.7%) )	1 (2.2%) )	0 (0.0%) )	0 (0.0%) )	14 (21.9%) )	2 (6.9%) )	2 (7.7%) )

\* yellow is lowest for NL and blue is highest; green is lowest for ENG and purple is highest.

## 5.6 Mesosystems

The mesosystem that was discussed most frequently in the case files was the relationship and communication between the school of the serious or persistent absentee and the parents. Both school and parents were more often recorded to complain about their relationship and communication in the Netherlands (45.8%) than in England (11.8%). In many cases, school and parents were blaming each other for the difficult relationship. Many parents, for example, claimed that school informed them far too late about their child being absent, which meant the absence had already progressed to a severe stadium before they could act. Schools, on the other hand, often argued that it was hard to reach parents and that parents did not show up at meetings arranged by the school to discuss the situation of their child.

Other mesosystems were discussed less explicitly in the case files. That being said, parents sometimes complained about the choice of peers of the young person and spoke about the negative

influence these peers had on their child. Furthermore, in some cases it became clear that the home situation had an impact on the young person at school and vice versa. In the next chapter, the interaction between different microsystems (so mesosystems) will become more clear in the in-depth case studies of some serious or persistent absentees.

## **5.7 Exosystems**

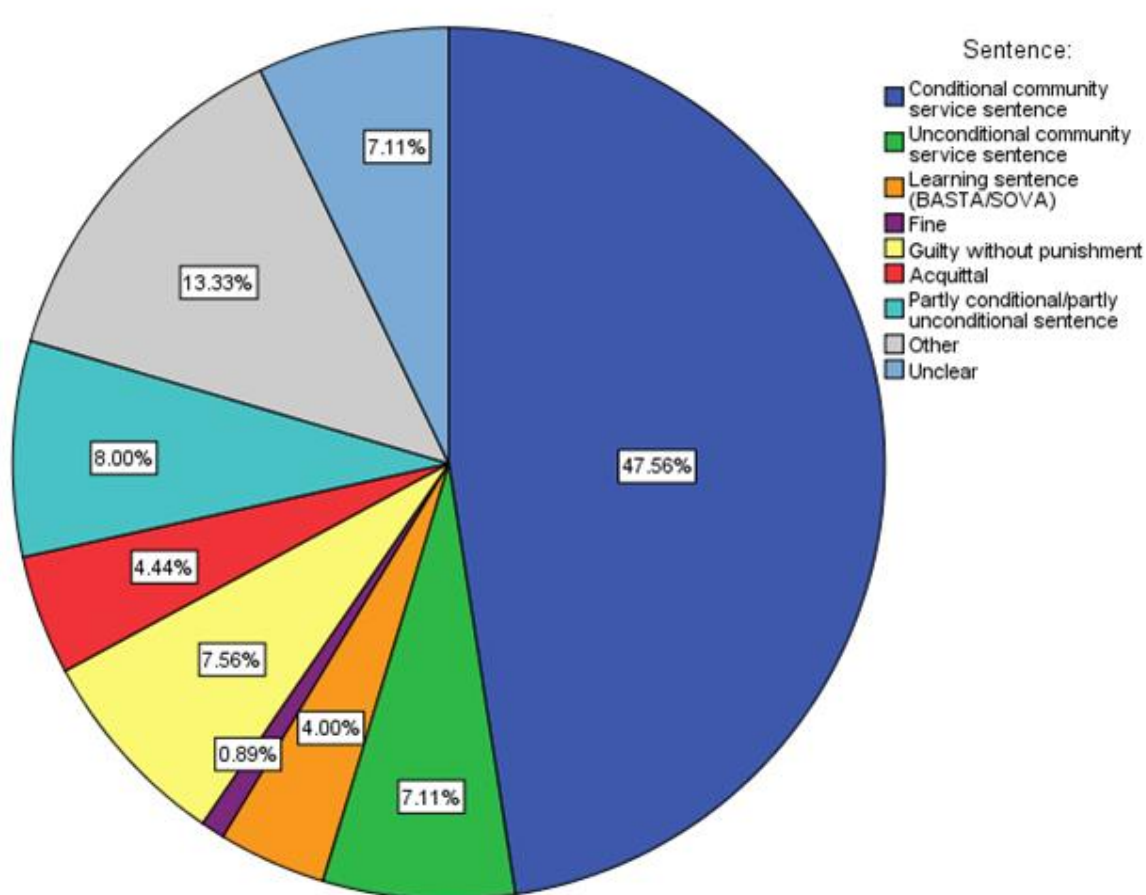
Both legal services and social welfare services are exosystems in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3). Therefore, in this section the response to both the serious or persistent absentees and their parents in both countries will be described with special attention for the balance between welfare and justice within this response. Subsequently, the effectiveness of these responses will be considered by looking at some short-term outcomes for the young person.

### **5.7.1 Sentences to serious or persistent absentees and their parents**

In the Netherlands, all serious or persistent absentees in the sample were taken to court. Figure 14 shows the sentences the Dutch serious or persistent absentees received. Almost half (47.56%) of the 225 absentees received a conditional community service sentence. In most cases one of the conditions during their probation period was that they had to observe the guidance of the youth probation officer. The youth probation officer usually tried to reduce the problems in the life of the young person by offering different forms of professional support to the young person. So, this sentence actually seems to have a balance between punishment (if you do not improve your attendance and keep your appointments with the youth probation officer, you will have to carry out the conditional sentence) and welfare (the youth probation officer sets up professional support for the young person and sometimes the family). Of the 30 absentees (13.33%) who received another sentence (See Figure 14), 17 received an unconditional learning sentence, which was either 'Basta' (a learning sentence specifically aimed at school non-attenders) or 'Sova' (a course to improve the social skills of the young person) in addition to a conditional community service sentence. This sentence, therefore, also includes both a punishment and a welfare element. The 18 (8.0%) absentees who received a partly conditional and partly unconditional sentence (See Figure 14) had to carry out a community service sentence, but then also had to still keep attending school and observe the guidance of a youth probation officer during the probation period. So, in these cases again a balance was sought between welfare and punishment.

Some absentees received only an unconditional community service sentence (7.11%) or a fine (0.89%). These sentences were clearly more punitive. They were often given to serious or persistent absentees who were either already close to 18 years old, or had already received sentences for other crimes they had committed and therefore were already placed under the

guidance of the youth probation service. Some young people were found guilty but without punishment (7.56%). This was often when their school attendance had already improved once the young person was in court, for example by switching schools, or when the life of the young person was so chaotic and full of problems that the judge found that the young person was not really to blame. In the latter cases, a supervision order was usually in place, so social services were already involved. Finally, some of the young people were acquitted (4.44%). In these cases, the young person could prove for example that they had been genuinely ill during the days they missed school. Overall, Figure 14 indicates that many of the Dutch persistent absentees received a sentence that was mainly welfare-aimed, with a chance of punishment in the future if the absence from school continued.



**Figure 14:** Pie chart which shows the different sentences the Dutch absentees received for their persistent absence from school

Table 24 shows the division of the sentences over the groups based on the intersecting vulnerability and offending behaviour continua. The most remarkable difference between the groups is the amount (7 absentees, 26.9%) of serious or persistent absentees within the *high vulnerability and high offending behaviour* group who received an unconditional community service sentence. This



suggests that for some young people in this group there was either already support in the form of a youth probation officer or a family guardian (when there was an OTS in place for the serious or persistent absentee, See Chapter 3) or the judge did not believe in the effect of a more welfare based response in these cases.

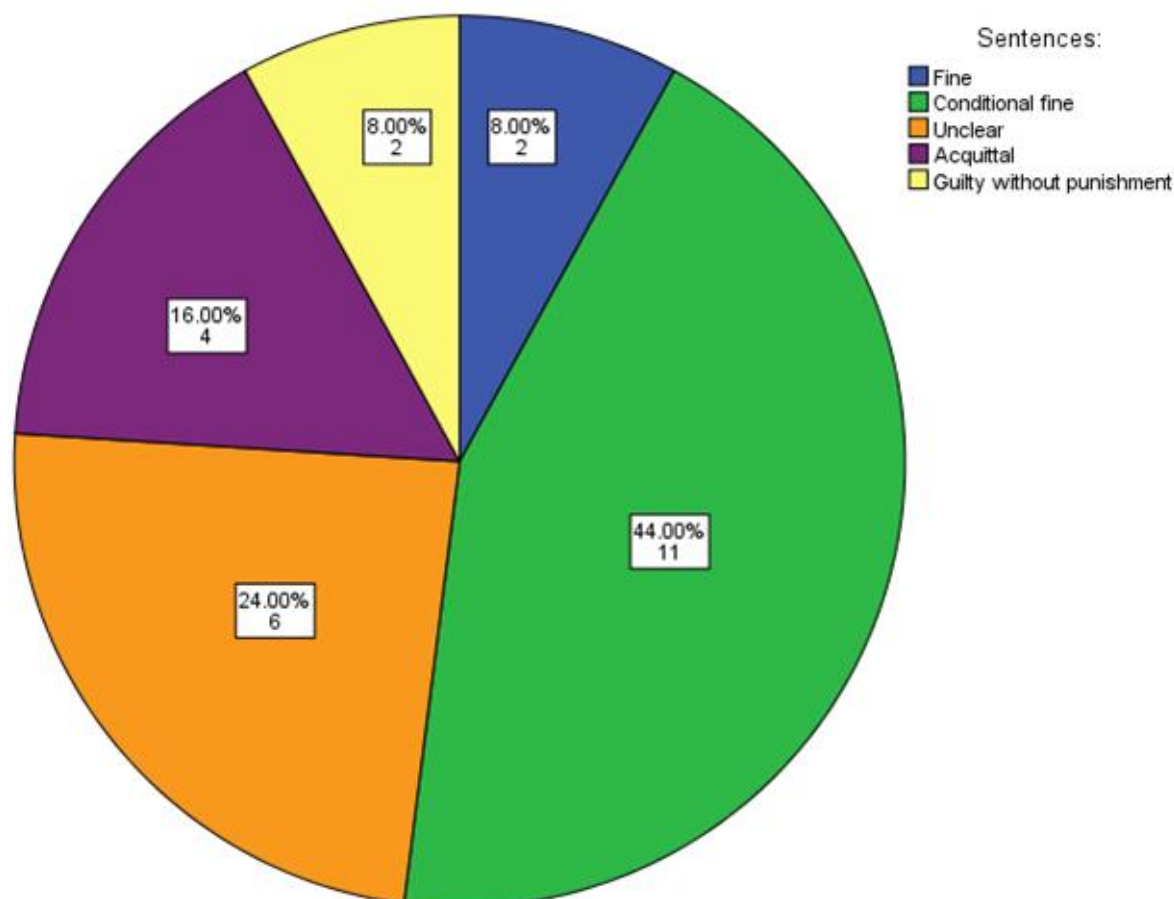
**Table 24. The sentences the Dutch absentees in each of the groups received**

	Low vulnerability/low offending behaviour	Primarily Offending behaviour	Primarily vulnerable	High vulnerability/High Offending behaviour
	N=103	N=32	N=64	N=26
<b>Conditional community service sentence</b>	55 (53.4%)	18 (56.3%)	25 (39.1%)	9 (34.6%)
<b>Other</b>	10 (9.7%)	4 (12.5%)	11 (17.2%)	5 (19.2%)
<b>Partly conditional/partly unconditional sentence</b>	7 (6.8%)	4 (12.5%)	7 (10.9%)	0 (0.0%)
<b>Guilty without punishment</b>	3 (2.9%)	4 (12.5%)	8 (12.5%)	2 (7.7%)
<b>Unconditional community service sentence</b>	4 (3.9%)	1 (3.1%)	4 (6.3%)	7 (26.9%)
<b>Unclear</b>	12 (11.7%)	1 (3.1%)	2 (3.1%)	1 (3.8%)
<b>Acquittal</b>	4 (3.9%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (6.3%)	2 (7.7%)
<b>Learning sentence (BASTA/SOVA)</b>	6 (5.8%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (4.7%)	0 (0.0%)
<b>Fine</b>	2 (1.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

\*yellow is lowest and blue is highest

In 25 of the 225 Dutch cases (11.11%) not only the young person but also one or both parents were prosecuted because of the serious or persistent absence from school. Most of the prosecuted

parents received a conditional fine (See Figure 15). Only two parents received an unconditional fine, which was the only unconditional sentence that was given. In four cases the parents were acquitted and in two cases they were found guilty, but not punished. Therefore, also in the sentencing of the parents the emphasis did not seem to be on punishment.



**Figure 15:** Pie chart that shows which sentences the parents of the Dutch serious or persistent absentees received

In England, there was no legal response to the young person because of their serious or persistent absence from school. This does not mean, however, there was no response at all. The school and in some cases the admissions, exclusions and reintegration team of the council would still try to find solutions to the absence of the young person. This meant that some young people were placed on a reduced timetable or switched schools (either to a different mainstream school or to a special school). However, the official response to the serious or persistent absence was aimed at the parents of the young person.

In 85 of the 293 English cases there were records of involvement of the School Attendance Team (SAT) with the parents. A final warning because of the school attendance of the young person was issued to 75 parents (25.60%). In addition, eight parents (2.73%) received a fixed penalty notice

for taking the child out of school during term time. And in two cases (0.68%), a School Attendance Panel (SAP) was set up instead of giving a final warning to the parents. Of these 85 parents where the SAT was involved, 16 (5.46% of the total sample) were prosecuted and had to appear in court for the serious or persistent absence of their child.

In two of the 16 cases in which parents had to appear in court due to the serious or persistent absence from school of their child, the parents were taken to court a second time. Table 25 shows the various sentences the prosecuted parents received. Please note that parents often received more than one of these sentences in one court case. For example, in all 10 cases in which parents had to pay some costs to the Educational Welfare Service (EWS), they also had to pay costs to Legal Services (LS). One of the parents who was prosecuted twice received two times a fine and costs EWS and costs LS. In five cases the parents received a parenting order, sometimes in addition to a conditional discharge. The sentences English parents were given can also be viewed along the lines of the welfare versus punishment continuum. The parenting order and the conditional discharge could be viewed as more welfare-orientated sentences, since they have the sole goal of preventing the serious or persistent absence to happen again. Paying a fine or costs is more punitive. In many cases there was a combination of costs and a conditional discharge (the combination of a fine and a conditional discharge is not possible) and therefore a balance between punishment and welfare was sought.

**Table 25. The sentences the prosecuted English parents received**

	Count	Range	Duration
Fine	7	50 - 350 pound	-
Costs EWS	10	25 - 564 pound	-
Costs LS	10	25 - 125 pound	-
Costs (total, not specified)	4	25 - 145	-
Parenting order	5	-	6 or 12 months
Conditional discharge	9	-	6, 12 or 24 months
Other (VS15)	2	-	-

The year the child was in when the parents were taken to court ranged from year 2 to year 10. The average year was 7.315. In the majority (10 out of 16) of the cases parents were taken to court because of the serious or persistent absence of a young person in year 8, 9 or 10 of secondary school. But five of the other cases were in year 4 and 5 of primary school. So, it seems that parents were most likely to be prosecuted near the end of either primary or secondary school, but not

anymore in the final year. Once a child was in year 11, it was often decided it was not in the public interest to prosecute anymore.

The results in this chapter have shown that many serious or persistent absentees experience an accumulation of risk factors at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3). This means that serious or persistent absence from school is in most cases a signal that there are underlying problems for the young person. Moreover tables 20 and 21 indicate that many serious or persistent absentees are suffering from individual problems and/or problems within their family. This means that taking court action to the young person and/or the parents does not seem to be an appropriate or proportionate response to the absence from school. Even though many of the actual sentences might be more welfare-orientated, taking parents and young people to court for persistent absence from school is a way of criminalising behaviour that should be dealt with within the social support systems. Therefore, prosecuting young people or parents is not a suitable response and therefore England should not adopt the possibility to also prosecute the young person. This means that prosecuting the young person is not a policy that should be transferred from the Netherlands to England.

### **5.7.2 The effects of different punishments on short-term outcomes**

This section will look at three short-term outcomes for the young person: whether or not the attendance improved, whether or not the young person obtained a qualification and whether or not the young person found employment. In some cases, both in England and the Netherlands the last information that was available for the young person was when the young person was still of secondary school age. This means that the young person was still (supposed to be) attending school, and would not have obtained a qualification yet or be looking for employment. These cases were therefore treated as discrete missing values. On the other hand, there were also cases in which there was information available after the young person could have obtained a qualification, but in these reports/ASSETS it was not entirely clear whether the young person did obtain a qualification or found employment. Since it was not mentioned, in many of these cases the young person would probably not have obtained a qualification. These cases were therefore not treated as missing values.

In the Netherlands, 45 of the 208 (21.6%) serious or persistent absentees did obtain a qualification. A VMBO-qualification was counted as a qualification, although this was not a start qualification, which means schooling would still be compulsory for this young person until the age of 18 (See Chapter 3). Absentees who received a fine (1, 50.0%), were found guilty without punishment (5, 33.3%) or who received a conditional community service sentence (28, 28.6%) were slightly more likely to obtain a qualification. Of those absentees whose parents were prosecuted,

only one (4.8%) obtained a qualification, but in this group five were still of compulsory school age during the last information available and therefore not taken into account. On the basis of these data the sentence type of the young person did not seem to make a considerable difference on the likelihood of the young person obtaining a qualification and sentencing the parents also seemed to have little effect.

The attendance of 52 (22.3%) of the Dutch absentees did improve at least for a short period after the punishment. This percentage was much higher for the young people who were found guilty without punishment (7, 41.2%) or acquitted (4, 40.0%), but these sentences were frequently given when the young person could prove during the court hearing that attendance was already back to being good. Attendance, however, did also seem to improve more often at least in the short term for those young people whose parents were prosecuted as well (10, 38.5%).

Over half (116, 51.6%) of the Dutch absentees were either still at school in the last report or not looking for a job and therefore treated as missing values. Of the other 109, there were 19 serious or persistent absentees (17.4%) working in the last report. On the other hand, 24 (22.0%) were stating that they would like to work but could not find a job in the last report. This percentage was much higher among absentees who received a fine (1, 100.0%) or an unconditional community service sentence (5, 50.0%).

When looking at the effect of the punishment on these short-term outcomes in the Netherlands, the prosecution of parents only seemed to have a positive impact on improving attendance. It was difficult to identify the impact of the different sentences for the young person on these outcomes, because especially an improvement in attendance could already have influenced the given sentence in court. But the more punitive sentences (unconditional community service sentence and fine) did seem to increase the chance of becoming unemployed.

In England, of the 110 YOT cases for which information about the short-term outcomes could be available, 41 were still (supposed to be) in school and were therefore treated as discrete missing values. In addition, 58 were not looking for a job and therefore not taken into account for the employment variable. In England, nine out of the 69 (13.0%) serious or persistent absentees obtained a qualification, 5 out of 52 (9.6%) were working and 18 out of 110 (16.4%) improved their attendance. Only seven of the cases in which parents were prosecuted were from the YOT sample. Since, the follow-up information was only available for the YOT-cases, it is not possible to consider the effect of different punishments to the parents on the short-term outcomes.

There was a significant association between country and the short term-outcomes employment and improving attendance. Dutch absentees were more likely to find employment than English absentees (chi-square (2, N=161) = 58.755,  $p < 0.001$ ). And although the difference between the countries was smaller, attendance in the short run more often improved for Dutch

absentees compared to English serious or persistent absentees as well (chi-square (3, N=335) = 13.725,  $p=0.001$ ). There was no significant association between country and obtaining a qualification. These inferential tests on the short-term outcomes do suggest that the Dutch response was slightly more effective in creating positive outcomes in the short run.

### **5.7.3 The vulnerability and offending behaviour continua groups and short-term outcomes**

Although in both countries for many cases the last ASSET or report did not provide information about some of the short-term outcomes for the serious or persistent absentee, it remains interesting to analyse whether there is a relationship between the vulnerability and offending behaviour continua and achieving positive outcomes. Table 26 therefore shows how many absentees in each group improved their attendance, obtained a qualification and managed to find a job (employment). In addition, it specifies how many young people in each group were unemployed. In the whole sample (both countries combined, only YOT for England), 20.9 percent of the absentees improved their attendance at least for a short period after the response of the school and/or the local authority, 19.5 percent obtained a qualification and only 14.9 percent managed to find a job. So, for the majority of young people in both countries, the short-term outcomes were not very positive.

Table 26 indicates some differences between the two countries in which groups were most likely to achieve positive outcomes. Whereas in the Netherlands, the *primarily offending behaviour* absentees seem to be doing quite well on these short-term outcomes compared to their countrymen, this was not the case in England. In England, on the other hand, it is the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group that seems to do relatively well, whereas many absentees in this group in the Netherlands struggle to get a positive outcome. This suggests that there was a clear difference between the English and the Dutch *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* and *primarily offending* groups. The level of offending and vulnerability seem to impact on the success of short-term outcomes in both countries. In the Netherlands, especially the vulnerable children (both the *primarily vulnerable* and the *high/high* group) are unlikely to get positive outcomes. In England, few absentees in the *primarily offending* and the *high/high* group get positive outcomes. This suggest a negative impact of a high level of offending behaviour, but the exact impact of a high vulnerability is hard to establish because of the small size of that group in England.

Table 26. Short-term outcomes for the different vulnerability and offending behaviour groups

	Low vulnerability/low offending behaviour		Primarily Offending behaviour		Primarily vulnerable		High vulnerability/High Offending behaviour	
	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL	ENG	NL
	N= 30	N =103	N =46	N =32	N =5	N =64	N = 29	N =26
Improved attendance	7 (23.3%)	19 (18.4%)	4 (8.7%)	15 (46.9%)	3 (60.0%)	13 (20.3%)	4 (13.8%)	5 (19.2%)
Unemployed <sup>1</sup>	4 (100.0%)	9 (17.0%)	21 (75.0%)	4 (26.7%)	1 (100.0%)	4 (16.7%)	18 (94.7%)	7 (41.2%)
Qualification obtained <sup>2</sup>	4 (36.4%)	22 (22.4%)	3 (8.8%)	9 (32.1%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (13.3%)	2 (8.7%)	6 (27.3%)
Employed <sup>1</sup>	0 (0.0%)	8 (15.1%)	5 (17.9%)	3 (20.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (20.8%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (17.6%)

\* yellow is lowest for NL and blue is highest; green is lowest for ENG and purple is highest.

<sup>1</sup> For the variables unemployed and employed the N was as follows: England: Low/low N=4, primarily offending N=28, primarily vulnerable N=1, high/high N=19. The Netherlands: Low/low N=53, primarily offending N=15, primarily vulnerable N=24, high/high N=17.

<sup>2</sup>For the variable qualification obtained the N was as follows: England: Low/low N=11, primarily offending N=34, primarily vulnerable N=1, high/high N=123. The Netherlands: Low/low N=98, primarily offending N=28, primarily vulnerable N=60, high/high N=22.

## 5.8 Conclusion

The prevalence of many of the risk factors discussed in this chapter differed between England and the Netherlands. English absentees seemed to be more often negatively influenced by their friends and drug use was a much bigger problem among the English absentees. They also experienced more problems within the family. In the Netherlands, more serious absentees considered sleep problems to be a factor in their absence from school and were more often said to be lonely (as in having no friends). But even the least present risk factors across the Dutch and English samples, were still

prevalent in around ten percent of the cases. This indicates that in both countries many persistent absentees experience an accumulation of risk factors at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system. However, the difference in how common specific risk factors were in each country points towards an impact of culture (macrosystem) on the presence of certain risk factors within each country, or at the very least differences in the recognition of these factors. Governments should also take these different characteristics into account when they consider policy transfer, because a response that is effective in the other country might not have the same effect due to the different characteristics of the absentees.

Similarly, the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour did impact on the likelihood of the serious or persistent absentee experiencing certain risk factors. The main difference between the two countries in this respect seemed to be between the *low vulnerability and low offending behaviour* and the *primarily offending* groups. Whereas in England absentees in the first group displayed the least problems at most levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system, in the Netherlands this was often the *primarily offending behaviour* group. This suggests that in the Netherlands, some absentees who did not commit many offences and were not taken into care did actually experience more of an accumulation of risk factors at the different levels than some of the young people in the *primarily offending* group. It is possible that the absence from school was a signal for many young people in the *low/low* group that there were issues at home, school or in other aspects of their life, and that for some absentees in the *primarily offending* group the school absence was more a form of age-related boundary-testing behaviour. In England this did not seem to be the case at all, as the prevalence of most risk factors was often quite high among absentees in the English *primarily offending* group. The difference between these groups in the two countries seems to be reflected in the short-term outcomes as well. In the Netherlands, the *primarily offending* group achieved more positive outcomes compared to the other groups, and in England in general absentees in the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group were getting better outcomes than English absentees in the other groups. This indicates that the level of vulnerability and the level of offending not only influence on the prevalence of certain risk factors, but also impact on the short-term outcomes for the serious or persistent absentee. This means that more attention should be paid towards the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour of serious or persistent absentees when deciding how best to respond.

It looked as if both countries were trying to shift the balance more towards welfare when responding to serious or persistent absentees and/or their parents. Both in England and the Netherlands, relatively few parents of the serious or persistent absentees in the sample were prosecuted, which suggests punishment of the parents was not the most important objective. In the Netherlands, parents who were prosecuted mostly received conditional sentences. In England



the emphasis seemed to be more on financial punishments, although often in conjunction with other more welfare based sentences. Many Dutch serious or persistent absentees also got a conditional sentence at first, which usually meant they had to follow the guidance of a youth probation officer in addition to attending school regularly during their probation period. So, also the punishment to the young person was more welfare based in practice than one would expect on the basis of the law. The type of sentence, however, did not have a big impact on the likelihood of successful short-term outcomes. The level of vulnerability and offending behaviour seemed to have much more impact on the short-term outcomes than the response. Whereas in England especially the *primarily offending* and the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* groups were less likely to get positive outcomes, in the Netherlands this was the case for the *primarily vulnerable* and also the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* groups.

The short-term outcomes improving attendance and finding employment, were slightly better for the Dutch absentees compared to the English absentees. There was no difference between England and the Netherlands in the number of serious or persistent absentees who obtained a qualification. In both countries, however, there were some cases for which no follow-up information was available because the young person had not (re)offended and in the Netherlands was not prosecuted because of serious or persistent absence again and had not had youth probation. It is possible, therefore, that in both countries the lighter cases, who might have been more likely to achieve positive outcomes, were excluded from the outcome variables. Even though outcomes seemed slightly better in the Netherlands, there was room for improvement in both countries, because only 20.9 percent of the total sample had improved their attendance, and this was the best success rate of all three short-term outcomes. This suggests that there is no reason for both England and the Netherlands to adopt policies of the other country. So, the low success rate on these short-term outcomes in both countries means that policy transfer should not take place. The next chapter will discuss the trajectories of 16 serious or persistent absentees in more detail. This should give a clearer picture on the accumulation of risk factors serious or persistent absentees experience and on the interaction between risk factors within and between different systems of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

## **Chapter 6: Comparing case studies of serious or persistent absentees in England and the Netherlands**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter showed the range of issues associated with serious or persistent absence from school across the samples collected in each country. It indicated that although there are many similarities between persistent absentees as a group, there are some differences between persistent or serious absentees within and between the two countries and across the four sub-groups categorised by level of vulnerability and offending behaviour. This chapter focuses on 16 serious or persistent absentees (eight in each country) in more detail. By describing and analysing these individual cases, the chapter aims to illustrate and explain both the complexities within, as well as the similarities and differences that can be found across cases in The Netherlands and England. Furthermore, the more qualitative description of each of these cases will give a better understanding of the life trajectory of the serious or persistent absentees in each country and the impact of the interaction of the absentees with the different systems surrounding them (See Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Chapter 1 Figure 3).

Convenience (i.e. cases with enough information) purposive sampling was used to select eight cases in each country. The selected cases in each country were based on the intersecting vulnerability and offending behaviour continua (See Chapter 4 Figure 8) and consisted of:

1. two low vulnerability/low offending behaviour cases
2. two primarily offending behaviour cases
3. two primarily vulnerable cases
4. two high vulnerability/high offending behaviour cases

### **6.2 Overview of selected case studies**

Table 27 shows a brief summary of the 16 selected cases. The table allows for a simple comparison of all the cases. All cases were given a fictitious name. Most of the selected young people seem to be quite old, but this was because the age during their first absence case (in the Netherlands) or the first ASSET (in the UK, which meant after their first offence) was taken. The case files did, however, often indicate that the serious or persistent school absence had started at a much younger age. There were four girls and twelve boys selected. The previous chapter already showed that especially those absentees who also displayed offending behaviour were more often boys than girls. This is the main reason there are more boys selected as a case study than girls. In the vast majority of the selected cases, the biological parents were not living together anymore (See Table 27). Tables 28, 29 and 30 give an overview of the different risk factors the young people experienced

at the individual level and within the microsystems family, school and peers. A thick (V) in these tables indicates that that problem is present in that case study. These tables make it easier to discover in which area that specific young person experienced the most problems. This information will be used throughout this chapter, when cases within and between groups are compared.

Table 27. Overview of the 16 selected case studies

Case	Group	Type of Absence <sup>1</sup>	Age	Sex <sup>2</sup>	Biological parents together? <sup>3</sup>	social services <sup>3</sup>	Care <sup>3</sup>	crimes before absence	crimes after absence	Custody <sup>3</sup>	Qualificatio n(s) obtained <sup>3</sup>
1 NL: Mark	Low	L, S	15	M	N	N	N	0	0	N	Y
2 NL: Lisa	vulnerability/L	S, D	15	F	N	N	N	0	0	N	Y
9 EN: Rick	ow offending	E	14	M	Y	N	N		3	N	Y
10 EN: Holly	behaviour	E, L, D	15	F	N	N	N		2	N	?
3 NL: Tim		E, S, D	15	M	Y	N	N	2	0	N	Y
4 NL: Robert	Primarily	L, S, D	15	M	N	N	N	1	3	N	Y
11 EN: Luke	offending	E, S, D, P	11	M	N	N	N		43	Y	N
12 EN: Finley	behaviour	S, D, P	11	M	N	N	N		30	N	?
5 NL: Aart		L, D, P	13	M	N	Y	Y	0	0	N	N
6 NL: Cindy	Primarily	L, S, D, P	13	F	N	Y	Y	0	1	Y	N
13EN: Ashley	vulnerable	E, S	15	F	N	Y	Y		1	N	?
14 EN: Charlie		S,D,P	13	M	N	Y	Y		4	N	N
7 NL: Ben	High	E, D, P	13	M	N	Y	Y	4	1	Y	N
8 NL: Kevin	vulnerability/	S, D	16	M	N	Y	Y	0	4	Y	N
15 EN: Harry	High	E, S	13	M	N	Y	Y		18	Y	N
16 EN: Jay	offending behaviour	E, S, D	12	M	N	Y	Y		53	Y	?

<sup>1</sup> E=Exclusion(s), L=Often late, S=Skipping some non-specific lessons, D=Missing whole days P=Not attended for a long period of time

<sup>2</sup> M=Male, F=Female

<sup>3</sup> Y=Yes, N=No, ?=not clear in the case file

Table 28. Overview of the individual problems of the selected cases per group

	Individual problems							
	Sleep	Mental Health		Physical health	Behaviour	Drug use	Alcohol use	Learning problems
		Anxiety	Depression					
1 NL: Mark							V	
2 NL: Lisa		V		V			V	
9 EN: Rick					V	V	V	V
10 EN: Holly	V				V	V	V	
3 NL: Tim					V	V	V	V
4 NL: Robert	V				V			
11 EN: Luke					V	V	V	V
12 EN: Finley		V			V	V	V	V
5 NL: Aart	V	V	V					
6 NL: Cindy	V		V	V				V
13EN: Ashley			V				V	
14 EN: Charlie	V				V	V		
7 NL: Ben				V	V	V	V	
8 NL: Kevin			V			V	V	
15 EN: Harry					V	V	V	
16 EN: Jay					V	V	V	V

Green = Low vulnerability/Low offending behaviour, Orange = Primarily offending behaviour, Purple = Primarily vulnerable, Red = High vulnerability/High offending behaviour

Table 29. Overview of the problems within the family microsystem of the selected cases per group

	Family								
	Parents separated	(mental) health problems parents	Substance misuse parents	Many conflicts within family	Custody Parents	Neglect /Abuse/ Witness DV	Debts/ Financial problems	changes of living situation/ Housing problems	Siblings with health issues/conduct problems/persistent absence
1 NL: Mark	V			V			V	V	V
2 NL: Lisa	V								
9 EN: Rick									
10 EN: Holly	V			V					
3 NL: Tim								V	
4 NL: Robert	V								
11 EN: Luke	V							V	V
12 EN: Finley	V								
5 NL: Aart	V	V		V			V	V	V
6 NL: Cindy	V	V		V		V	V	V	V
13 EN: Ashley	V		V	V	V	V	V	V	V
14 EN: Charlie	V		V	V		V	V	V	
7 NL: Ben	V	V	V	V	V	V		V	V
8 NL: Kevin	V			V					
15 EN: Harry	V	V	V	V	V	V		V	V
16 EN: Jay	V	V	V			V		V	V

Green = Low vulnerability/Low offending behaviour, Orange = Primarily offending behaviour, Purple = Primarily vulnerable, Red = High vulnerability/High offending behaviour

Table 30. Overview of the problems within the school and peers microsystems of the selected cases per group

	School				Peers			
	Weak performan ce	Bad relationship teachers	No connection with classmates	Bullied	Lack of friends	Police involve ment	Not academically orientated	Often Being outside with friends
1 NL: Mark		V						V
2 NL: Lisa				V				
9 EN: Rick					V			V
10 EN: Holly							V	V
3 NL: Tim		V					V	V
4 NL: Robert	V		V					
11 EN: Luke	V	V				V	V	V
12 EN: Finley	V	V				V		V
5 NL: Aart			V		V			
6 NL: Cindy	V	V	V					
13EN: Ashley								
14 EN: Charlie	V	V				V		V
7 NL: Ben	V	V				V	V	V
8 NL: Kevin			V					V
15 EN: Harry	V	V				V	V	V
16 EN: Jay	V	V				V	V	V

Green = Low vulnerability/Low offending behaviour, Orange = Primarily offending behaviour, Purple = Primarily vulnerable, Red = High vulnerability/High offending behaviour

### **6.3 Description of each of the cases**

In this section, each of the case studies will be described in more depth by emphasising at which level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3) the young person experienced the most problems. These case studies are based on the case files of the serious or persistent absentees, which means that all information is derived from the reports/ASSETS written by professionals after an assessment of the situation of the young people. Professionals in both countries used an assessment instrument as a basis for their assessment and the report. However, the case files are still based on the interpretation of the professional. In the Netherlands, the professional would use the assessment to give a sentence advice to the judge which means that the serious or persistent absentee and the parents could have tried to give desirable answers to influence this sentence advice. In addition, whilst in some case files the chronology of the reports clearly indicate the pathway that the young person followed, in others it was much harder to establish this based on the available information. Finally, professionals in both countries seemed to focus very much on emphasising the problem areas, and fewer information was provided about the areas where there were not many problems or maybe even protective factors. So, whilst the case studies will give a good insight in the differences and similarities between serious or persistent absentees and clearly show some interaction between risk factors at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the fact that they are based on secondary data case files will have an impact on the description of the cases. The response to the serious or persistent absence from school and the outcome for each serious or persistent absentee will also be described. The case descriptions will be ordered per group based on the intersecting vulnerability and offending behaviour continua as set out in Chapter 4 Figure 8. After the description of all four cases in a group, a short comparison will follow in which the similarities and differences (between the two countries) for the cases in that group will be set out.

#### **6.3.1 The low vulnerability/low offending behaviour cases**

##### **Case 1: Mark (NL), 15-year old Dutch boy**

Mark often showed up late for school and skipped several lessons a week. After he switched to a different mainstream school, only being late remained a problem. Mark did not have many individual problems or problems with peers, and after he switched schools he also enjoyed attending school again. The main issues for Mark, apart from his school absence, were within the family. His parents separated a year before his absence from school started. Debts of his parents meant that there was a threat that the family would lose their house, but in the end father could



live in a squatted house and worked as much hours as he could (with his wages being attached). His younger brother was diagnosed with autism.

In addition to switching schools, Mark was also sentenced by a judge to a conditional community service sentence of 30 hours with a 2 year probation period. The special condition was to observe the guidance of the youth probation service during these two years. In the last report, he had obtained his 'VMBO'-qualification and was attending an MBO-level 2 course in 'Private Security'. He was also working part-time in a supermarket.

#### **Case 2: Lisa (NL), 15-year old Dutch girl**

Lisa's absence from school started with skipping several lessons a week at school, but this progressed to missing whole school days. She lived with her biological father, and had no contact with her mother anymore. The living situation at her biological father was good; stable housing situation, no financial problems and not many arguments. So, the lack of contact with the biological mother was the only risk factor at the family level that Lisa was experiencing. At the individual level, Lisa did have some physical health problems, which meant she was often ill. She was also quite anxious. According to Lisa (who had told this to the professional who wrote the report) the main reason for her serious absence from school, however, was that she was bullied at school.

In the first absence case, the judge sentenced Lisa to an educational community service sentence. She had to attend 20 hours of Tools4U (a training course that focused on cognitive and social skills of young people between 12 and 18 who committed one or more offences (in this case the persistent absence from school was the offence). The second time, Lisa received a conditional community service sentence of 20 hours with a two year probation period. During these two years she had to observe the guidance of the youth probation service. However, this was ended early by the youth probation officer, because all goals were achieved. Lisa obtained her 'VMBO'-qualification and an 'MBO'-level 2 qualification (a vocational qualification). In the last report, she was working as an accounting officer.

#### **Case 9: Rick (ENG), 15-year old White British boy**

Rick's absence from school consisted mainly of exclusions (a fixed-term exclusion due to fighting and a permanent exclusion due to cannabis use). He committed three offences. His family seemed a strong protective factor; there were no risk factors at that level and both parents were working (running a business together). The main issues were at the individual level. Rick displayed aggressive and impulsive behaviour, used alcohol and soft drugs, and had mild learning difficulties. In addition, he did have friends with police contacts.

Rick was afraid he would have to attend a special school after his permanent exclusion, but he could switch to a different mainstream school instead. His attendance was good there and he did not get excluded anymore. He obtained some GCSE's and was due to start college in the last ASSET, combined with an apprenticeship in the business of his parents.

#### **Case 10: Holly (ENG), 15-year old White British girl**

Holly often showed up late for school, sometimes missed whole school days and received a fixed-term exclusion. She committed two offences. Her risk factors were scattered among the individual level and different microsystems. Her parents were separated and she did not have any contact with her biological father anymore. She lived with her mother and one sibling and there were many conflicts between Holly and her mother. She often absconded from home to spend time with older men. At the individual level, she had sleep problems (would go to bed late and then did not get up early enough to be on time at school), behaviour problems (anti-social and aggressive behaviour) and drank alcohol and used soft drugs. She also spent a lot of time with friends who were not academically orientated outside the house.

Holly was placed on a reduced timetable, which meant she only had to attend school in the mornings, but often got out of bed too late to attend. Mother was taken to court because of the persistent absence of Holly when she was in year 8. Holly's attendance was 47 percent when the warning was issued. The mother was sentenced to 60 pounds costs and a 12 months conditional discharge sentence. Holly's attendance had increased to 80 percent twenty weeks after the court date of her mother. However, her attendance only really improved in year 11. In the last ASSET, Holly was due to sit her GCSE's. She would like to attend an air cabin crew course in college, for which she needed at least four GCSE's D. She expected to be able to get those.

#### **6.3.2 Comparing the four low vulnerability/low offending behaviour cases**

These four cases show the complexity of serious or persistent absence from school. Whilst all four serious or persistent absentees experienced some risk factors, there were great differences between which microsystems seemed to be most problematic (See Tables 28, 29 and 30). Furthermore, the type of absence of the four absentees varied considerably. Some were mainly excluded, whilst others primarily chose to not attend themselves. Often there was a progression from missing several hours at first to whole school days. Rick and Holly (the English cases) both displayed some behaviour problems and had committed some crimes, whereas Mark and Lisa (the Dutch cases) did not commit any crimes and did not show behaviour problems (See Table 27 and 28). Table 29 shows that of the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group (the green cases), Mark experienced the most problems within his family. The Dutch cases both experienced a

problem at school, while the English cases experienced more peer related problems (See Table 30). The response to the serious or persistent absence from school was different for each of these four cases; Lisa even had to go to court two times, because her absence from school was still continuing after the first time. In the end, all four serious or persistent absentees in the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour group* had a relatively positive outcome. They obtained a qualification and were either studying or working during the last information that was available.

### **6.3.3 The primarily offending cases**

#### **Case 3: Tim (NL), 15-year old Dominican boy**

Tim had moved from the Dominican Republic to the Netherlands 6 years before he was first prosecuted (at age 15) for his persistent absence from school. His absence started by missing the last hours of a school day. He argued that he skipped these last hours, because he found being at school till 4 o'clock too long. This then progressed to missing whole school days. He was also often excluded from school due to his behaviour. The main issues for Tim were at the individual level; he started using cannabis when he was 13, drank alcohol and had behaviour problems. He displayed these behavioural problems also at school, which led to exclusions. He committed two crimes (one violent crime and one criminal damage). He completed the community service sentences of 16 hours, which he received for these crimes, successfully.

For his absence from school, Tim was sentenced to a 50 hour conditional community service sentence with a two year probation period with youth probation. He did obtain his 'VMBO (BBL)' qualification, which does not count as a start qualification in the Netherlands (See Chapter 3). He then dropped out of an MBO course, because there was less guidance and structure at this school and he was unable to find an internship. In the last report, Tim was almost 19 and stated he would like to work (instead of attending education), but did not find a job yet and was then registered at a school (Wijkschool), so that he could retain his student maintenance grant.

#### **Case 4: Robert (NL), 15-year old mixed Dutch/Surinam boy**

Robert was often late at school, and then also started skipping hours at the end of the day due to tiredness. In the end, he skipped whole school days. He had committed three violent crimes (assault, threatening with serious crimes and simple maltreatment) and a property crime (theft). There were not many problems within his family; Robert lived with his biological mother and stepfather, and was still in touch with his biological father. He had a good connection with his stepfather. The main problems were at the individual level. He was diagnosed with ADHD and pervasive development disorder not otherwise specified (PDD NOS). In addition, he suffered from

sleep problems, which were according to Robert and his mother the main reason for his persistent absence from school. These individual problems also led to problems at school; he found it hard to connect with peers at school (maybe due to his PDD NOS).

Robert was prosecuted twice for the persistent absence from school. He received a 40 hour conditional community service sentence in 2010, and in 2012 a conditional 150 euro fine. Both times he was given youth probation. The youth probation officer set out two main goals for Robert. The first was that he would not commit anymore crimes. This goal was achieved. The second goal was to attend appropriate education and to not be absent from school anymore. Robert managed to obtain his MBO-level 2 qualification in 'business administration' and planned to start a level 3 course in 'car mechanics'. His absence was reduced considerably, but he still found it difficult to show up on time and therefore being late remained a problem.

#### **Case 11: Luke (ENG), 11-year old White British boy**

Luke was cognitively impaired. His absence was a combination of truanting (missing some lessons and whole days) and exclusions due to his behaviour. In the end, he was excluded almost every day at the Harbour special school. He committed 43 offences. Among those offences were severe property crimes (burglary of a dwelling with intent) and severe violent crimes (robbery). He received various sentences for his offences, ranging from a final warning + offending programme to three detention and training orders (two times four months and one time ten months), so he spent a lot of time in custody.

Luke experienced the most problems at the individual level and within the peers microsystem. He was diagnosed with ADHD, had learning difficulties and used alcohol, soft drugs and hard drugs. He also spent much time outside the home with friends who were involved with the police and not attending school either. His family was not the most problematic microsystem, because both parents (although separated) were supportive. However, Luke's living situation did change very often: he was mainly living with his mother and stepfather, but had also lived with his father for some periods and in a B&B, a youth hostel (All Saints hostel) and some periods in prison. One of his brothers had also committed crimes and displayed attendance problems at school.

Luke had switched schools to a school for children with special needs and he was placed on a reduced timetable. He started a multi trade course at college (3 days a week), but lost his placement when he was remanded. He indicated that he wanted to attend college again after his release, but in the last ASSET it became clear that this had not happened. He then stated he did not want to attend college anymore and would like to find employment. But he was not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) at that point, and did not obtain any qualifications.

### **Case 12: Finley (ENG), 11-year old White European boy**

Finley had Special Educational Needs (SEN) and language impairment. His absence started by missing a couple of hours, but progressed to missing whole days and not attending school at all for a long period of time. He had committed 30 offences. Most of these were violent crimes, of which robbery was the most severe. He received a variety of sentences for his offences and was placed in a secure unit, but did not receive a detention order.

The main issues for Finley were at the individual level. He suffered from panic attacks, displayed behaviour problems and used alcohol and soft drugs. He also spent a lot of time with friends who were also involved with the police. His parents were recently separated (in the first ASSET) but seemed both supportive, although mother also made excuses for Finley's offending behaviour. At school, Finley also displayed behaviour problems and he was hardly attending at the special school.

Finley received home tuition for a period of time, which was working well. But when he was moved back to the Harbour School (on a one hour per day reduced timetable), his attendance deteriorated again. His parents received a final warning when Finley was in year 8 and his attendance was zero percent. The attendance over the six-week monitoring period was three percent. After that no further action was taken against the parents, because the young person was placed in a secure unit. In the last ASSET he was in his last year on roll at the Harbour school following a construction course at college. It was unclear whether he obtained/sat any GCSE's.

#### **6.3.4 Comparing the four primarily offending cases**

There are many similarities between the four *primarily offending* cases. For all of them, the area where they experienced the most risk was at the individual level (See Table 28), and individual problems were in most cases also the biggest cause for their absence from school. Three of the four had learning difficulties. The behaviour problems they all displayed got them often into trouble at school as well, which led to being sent home, official exclusions and strained relationships with teachers. The externalising problem behaviour also meant they would be out of the house often with peers who also had had police involvements and/or were skipping school as well. The individual behaviour of these *primarily* offending cases was thus impacting on their functioning in different microsystems (especially school and peers; See Table 30). This is in line with Bandura's social cognitive theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 4), which indicates that personal behaviour interacts with environmental influences. Interestingly, these four absentees experienced relatively few problems within the family (See Table 29), so their behaviour problems seemed to have less of an impact within the family than at school.

Luke and Finley (the English cases) committed much more crimes (this is in line with the findings from Chapter 5) than Tim and Robert (the Dutch cases) (See Table 27), but the offences they had committed were also more severe (burglary's and robbery's compared to simple assault, theft and criminal damage). The response to the absence from school was also different for the Dutch and the English cases. Both Dutch boys received a conditional sentence with youth probation, and both English boys switched to a school for children with special needs and were placed on a reduced timetable. Tim and Robert both managed to obtain a qualification in the end, although Tim's qualification does not count towards the qualification requirement of the Dutch government (See Chapter 3). The outcome for the English *primarily* offending cases was less positive. Luke was NEET and Finley's attendance remained problematic and it was unclear whether or not he obtained a qualification.

### **6.3.5 The primarily vulnerable cases**

#### **Case 5: Aart (NL), 13-year old Dutch boy**

Aart's absence problems already started at primary school. At secondary school, he was often late at first but then also skipped whole days and finally did not attend school at all after the first year of secondary school until he was 17 years old. The serious or persistent absence at school started due to severe problems within the family: parents were in the process of divorce when the absence at primary school started, father had severe mental health problems and attempted suicide three times (Aart found his father after one of these attempts), his mother had physical health problems (loss of vision with an unclear cause), there were many conflicts between the parents, there was a constant threat of losing the house because parents could not pay the mortgage anymore due to debts, and his older sister was bullied at school and persistently absent. These problems within the family were probably causing Aart to develop several problems at the individual level as well: he had sleep problems, a gaming addiction and mental health problems (both anxiety and depression). In addition, he was diagnosed with PDD NOS.

Aart and his sister were placed under supervision of the state (OTS). Due to his mental health problems and gaming addiction, he was later placed in a mental health facility (at this point he already had not attended school anymore for over a year). Both Aart and his parents were initially sentenced to a (learning) community service sentence in the form of attending the course 'Tools For You' for his persistent absence from school. His placement in the mental health facility seemed to have worked, and in the last report he was not addicted to gaming anymore. He volunteered at a wood processing company, which gave him something meaningful to do during the day. It also got him out of his social isolation and he had more friends. He seemed motivated to

start a vocational education course towards assistant-carpenter. He could then do an internship at the company where he was volunteering. Finally, he was on the waiting list for a guided living provision.

#### **Case 6: Cindy (NL), 13-year old Cape Verdean girl**

Cindy often showed up late for school, but she was also an in-school truant (where she was in school but not attending (the right) classes). In addition she skipped whole school days and did not attend for longer periods of time. Her TIQ was 75, but this could have been caused by prolonged periods of not attending school.

The main issues for Cindy were at home. During the serious or persistent absence from school, she lived with her biological mother and two siblings (one older and one younger brother). In the past, she had also lived with an aunt for three months and with her father. This was due to physical and mental health problems (psychoses and borderline personality disorder) of her mother. Her biological parents separated in 2000 and got back together for a brief period in 2005. The biological mother used to have severe debts and was taking part in a debt restructuring programme. This meant that there was limited money available in the family. Mother seemed incapable to create a clear structure and routine. She could not cope with raising her children and the household chores. There was often no food in the home and the children frequently had to go to school without breakfast. There were also many conflicts between the mother and the older children. Cindy acted as the boss and did not listen to her mother; they had a disturbed mother-daughter relationship and Cindy was emotionally neglected. In addition, she witnessed domestic violence between her parents when she was younger. She also often babysat her three-year-old brother. Cindy experienced individual problems as well. She regularly suffered from headache and stomach ache (twice a week). She also complained about not being able to sleep at night, which led to being late at school or not going at all. She slept a lot during the day and was often inside the house. Additionally, she suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS) and had a depressed period.

Cindy and her siblings did have an OTS. Later, she was placed in a crisis-care facility, because the situation at home was no longer viable. She was forced to leave this crisis-care facility early, and lived with her aunt for a while. She then went back to living with her mother. Mother received a lot of support to help her deal with the debts and her mental health problems. Cindy initially refused to cooperate with all support that was offered. She was prosecuted due to her serious absence from school three times. The first time she received a conditional community service sentence of 16 hours. The second time she received an unconditional learning community service sentence of 20 hours, in addition she had to work the 16 hours from the first case (because of the

new persistent absence from school). The third time she was sentenced to an unconditional community service sentence of 30 hours, plus the 5 hours from the previous learning sentence (that she had not completed) were converted to a working sentence. Because she did not complete this community service sentence successfully, she was placed in substitute custody for two days.

When Cindy was almost 18, she was still living with her mother, but this was not going well. Both her brothers were taken into care and placed out of the house. She was still persistently absent from school and had not obtained any qualifications. When she was in school, however, her behaviour was good. She also was cooperating with the support from RIAGG to address her mental health problems, but she did not accept any other support. She did not see her biological father anymore.

### **Case 13: Ashley (ENG), 15-year old White European girl**

Ashley's absence consisted mainly of fixed-term exclusions, but in addition she skipped some non-specific lessons. She had committed one shoplifting offence, for which she received a youth restorative disposal order. The main issues for Ashley were within the family microsystem. She has four siblings and was living with her mother until she was 7 years old. The family had been evicted multiple times due to anti-social behaviour. She then moved a lot between different family members before she was placed into foster care. She had no contact with her biological father and was only allowed limited contact with her biological mother. Her mother had a heroin addiction and was often in and out of prison. The addiction also led to financial problems. Ashley was physically and sexually abused by friends of her mother in exchange for heroine. An older brother was also a serious or persistent absentee, a prolific offender and he was NEET in his last ASSET. Some of her siblings also had drug and alcohol problems. There were not many risk factors at other levels, although Ashley was often down.

The response to the serious or persistent absence from school was unclear. She was placed into foster care, because of the situation at home. Her attendance did improve and Ashley seemed settled in her foster care family. School was, however, quite far from the home of the foster family, which meant she had to take a taxi, and she did not enjoy that. She had a good connection with her foster care mother. However, she did want to go back to living with her biological mother and did not understand why this was not possible. She did not commit any new crimes after the shoplifting offence, which means there were no newer ASSETS and it remains, therefore, unclear whether she obtained a qualification and/or found employment.



#### **Case 14: Charlie (ENG), 13-year old White European boy**

Charlie's absence started with skipping some non-specific lessons, but this progressed to missing whole school days and weeks. In the end, he did not attend school for a long time anymore, and he missed a lot of year 7 and 8 at school. His main problems were within the family microsystem. Charlie has four siblings and lived in foster care (5 different placements) when he was between 5 and 8 years old, because both his biological parents had a heroin addiction. This was all before Charlie committed 4 offences (two times criminal damage, trespassing and possession of an offensive weapon). After these foster placements, he went back to living with his biological mother (parents were separated). There used to be many conflicts within the family and he had witnessed domestic violence when he was young. Mother was living off benefits and struggled financially. In addition to these family problems, there were several risk factors at other levels as well. Charlie did not enjoy school, had a bad relationship with teachers and his school performance was weak. He also spent a lot of time outside the house with friends who were also involved with the police. Charlie also used soft drugs, and played computer games at night, which meant he had trouble getting into a good sleep pattern.

Charlie was first placed in a special learning centre of his mainstream school. His attendance improved, but he was still often sent home due to his behaviour. He was then moved to the Harbour school (a special school), but did not often attend there. He only sat his exams for maths and English (grades E or F). He then went to college for 7 months, but was asked to leave because he kept getting into trouble. He had a period of two years without offences, but carried an offensive weapon when he was 17. In the last ASSET he was NEET, and did not see the consequences of not looking for work (he would lose his benefits).

#### **6.3.6 Comparing the four primarily vulnerable cases**

It is clear that all four *primarily vulnerable* absentees experienced the most problems within the family microsystem (See Table 29). And although the problems within their families were different, it seemed to have affected the functioning (although not in all cases to the same extent) of all four vulnerable absentees in other microsystems and at the individual level as well. Both for Cindy and Aart (the Dutch cases) the problems within their family seemed to have caused serious mental health problems, and Ashley was also often down. Both boys were having a gaming addiction and sleep problems. Furthermore, apart from Ashley, they all had very long periods of not attending school at all.

With this accumulation of problems within different microsystems and at the individual level, it is not surprising that the outcomes for these *primarily vulnerable* absentees were not very positive (See Table 27). In some cases (for Aart and Ashleigh), the placement outside their family

home seemed to have created some positive effects, but during the last information they had not obtained a qualification (although Ashleigh was still in school) and were not doing paid work. Cindy was supposed to be in school as well, but she was still a persistent absentee. Charlie was NEET in the last ASSET and did not show much willingness to change that.

### **6.3.7 The high offending/high vulnerability cases**

#### **Case 7: Ben (NL), 13-year old Moroccan boy**

Ben had a disharmonic intelligence profile (VIQ 103 en PIQ 85). He was often excluded, skipped whole school days and did not attend school for a long period of time. He committed five offences in total and received a 44 days prison sentence. There were many problems within the family. He was living at his grandmother with his older brother during the first absence case. His mother had then already died from cancer and his oldest brother had died in a car accident at the age of 20. Before mother died, the three brothers were living with her. The biological parents were already divorced. Ben did not have any contact with his father, who had a drug addiction and had been in custody multiple times, anymore. Father physically abused both mother and the children before the parents separated. Grandmother had custody over Ben, but his behaviour problems and persistent absence became too much for her to deal with. He was then taken into care and placed in various open and closed residential care settings. Both older brothers were also serious absentees and young offenders.

In addition to these family problems, Ben had problems at the individual level and with peers. He suffered from migraines and was diagnosed with ODD. He also spent a lot of time outside with friends who also had police involvements. Ben was seen as the leader of a group of five to ten young people who terrorised the neighbourhood by committing criminal damage, theft at shops, and publicly assaulting people. In addition, he was suspected of drug dealing within the closed residential settings he was placed. He escaped from these care settings multiple times and was then sometimes missing for a couple of months.

When the absence first started, school argued they found it difficult to provide Ben with the attention he was asking for. He was sent out of the class almost daily, failed to comply with appointments made with teachers, did not care about any punishment and his grades were bad. He was offered support from school social work, but refused this. School then decided they could no longer educate Ben. From then on, he switched schools many times and did not attend school at all for a long period of time because of this. Ben was sentenced to a 20 hour conditional community service sentence with 2 years youth probation for his persistent absence from school. Later, he was placed under supervision (OTS), which was ended when he was 18 years old. He did

learn to express his feelings better and worked towards becoming more independent. In the last report, he was on the waiting list for a guided living project. He still had problems with authority and complying with rules. In addition, he found it difficult to have positive contacts with peers. Ben did not obtain any qualification, because he did not attend school for a long period of time.

#### **Case 8: Kevin (NL), 16-year old Dutch boy**

Kevin started skipping some lessons a week and this progressed to whole days. He said to the professional of the RVDK that he found it easy to skip school, because there were barely consequences at first. However, he missed many exams through his absence, which meant he had to redo the year. After that he did not like his new class. Kevin committed three property crimes (two times from his own family) and one possession of soft drugs crime. He was sentenced to a seven day custodial sentence and a 100 hour conditional community service sentence. He had to work these 100 hours, because he refused to cooperate with the support set up by his probation officer.

A mix of individual and family problems seem to have started his absence from school. At the individual level; Kevin was diagnosed with dysthymic disorder and had a cannabis addiction. Kevin was very distressed by the separation of his parents and felt they had moved on too quickly. His biological father was remarried and he did not see him more than four times a year. He had a difficult relationship with his stepfather, which resulted in a lot of arguing at home. Mother and stepfather separated due to the strains the situation with Kevin had put on their relationship. By then, Kevin had already left the house and lived in a crisis care facility. According to Kevin the problems at school and at home were intensifying each other. The problems and strained relationships at home were part of the reason for his absence from school and his persistent absence brought about even more conflicts at home.

Kevin was placed under supervision of the state (OTS) and outside the house (MUHP). He was first placed in a residential care setting for crisis placements and later in a guided living residential group. This last placement broke down, however, because Kevin did not abide to the group rules. Kevin was sentenced to an unconditional community service sentence of 30 hours for his persistent absence from school. He already had to observe the guidance of the youth probation service due to some of the other offences he committed. Youth probation was stopped, however, because Kevin seemed unmotivated and was not cooperating well enough. During the last report, Kevin was NEET for over a year. He had started a work-learning project with an internship at a transport company earlier, but this all fell apart quickly because the work was not what he expected. Kevin did not obtain any qualifications and was planning to enrol in adult evening education to obtain a qualification. He also still smoked cannabis every day.

**Case 15: Harry (ENG), 13-year old White British boy**

Harry skipped some classes and was often asked to leave the premises at 10.30 due to fighting with other children. He also was fixed-term excluded multiple times. Harry had committed 18 offences of which most were property crimes. He was charged three times with 'Burglary of a dwelling with intent' which was the most severe property crime. He also committed two violent crimes (assaults). His sentences consisted of a police reprimand, a 5 pound fine, youth restorative disposal, a 5 month referral order and two detention orders (one of 5 months and one of 18 months).

Harry's absence seemed to be caused by a mix of individual problems, which led to problems within the school and peers microsystem, and family problems. The main issues at the individual level were his drug use and his aggressive and impulsive behaviour. His behaviour got him into trouble at school as well: He was attending a school for children with special needs due to his behaviour problems, but he bullied other children and was often asked to leave the premises. His school performance was weak and his attendance also depended on his living situation (seemed to be better when he was living with his father). Harry was often outside with delinquent friends. Harry's biological parents were separated and he did not have regular contact with his biological mother. He sometimes lived with his father, but had also been placed in foster care and his father was sometimes homeless (Harry then lived with ex-partner of father). Father suffered from arthritis, had a history of drugs and alcohol abuse and had been taken into custody. Harry had witnessed domestic violence between his father and several partners. In the later ASSETS, father was not allowed unsupervised contact with his children anymore, but Harry still wanted to live with his father. He also had an older brother (who was known to the YOT and had absence problems) with whom he had a good connection. This brother died (due to a brain tumour) at the age of 18 (when Harry was 16).

Harry had switched schools to a school for children with special needs. He also went to a school in prison whilst he was in custody. His attendance did improve for a while when he went back to live with his dad. He did sit some GCSE's, but did not get any results because he did not focus on his exams. Harry was in prison in the last ASSET and before that he was still of compulsory school age.

**Case 16: Jay (ENG), 12-year old White British boy**

Jay was absconding from school and often excluded because of his behaviour. So, he sometimes missed a couple of lessons a day, but also skipped whole school days. He was charged with 53 offences, among them 13 property crimes (burglary of a dwelling was the most severe), nine violent

crimes (assault occasioning actual bodily harm was the most severe), 13 breaches of orders, 12 times criminal damage. In addition, Jay committed two traffic offences (two times 'interfering/tampering with motor vehicle'), and one 'pedestrian', 'one arson', one 'having an article with blade or point in a public place', and one 'indecent exposure' offence (this is a sexual offence). He received a variety of punishments for these crimes, was sentenced to three detention centre orders (two times four months and one time a year) and an extended custodial sentence of a year.

Most of his problems were caused by a disturbed upbringing which led him to develop Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD). Jay was taken into care when he was very young due to abuse and neglect. He was adopted when he was three years old. From then on he lived with his adoptive parents, but was sometimes placed into different children's homes (because his adoptive parents could not cope with his behaviour), to then go back to the adoptive family home. When he was older he was often sofa-surfing or in custody. The adoptive parents were still together when his absence first started, but his adoptive mother died in 2009. The adoptive mother suffered from depression and had a chronic illness. The adoptive father had 'alleged' (he denied it, but smelled like alcohol at 10 am) alcohol problems. Jay had one sibling, who was also a persistent absentee and offending. At the individual level, apart from the RAD, Jay was diagnosed with ADHD and used soft drugs. He also spent much time outside with delinquent friends, who were also not attending school.

Jay was already absconding and excluded from school at a very young age due to his behaviour. He also had severe learning problems and dyslexia. He had troubles reading and writing, and he was reading at the level of a 7-year old when he was 13. His behaviour led to a disrupted school career; he received home tuition (from which he was excluded after a violent incident (he followed his tutor with an axe)) and was placed on a reduced timetable (he failed to attend the two mornings a week on his reduced timetable). Jay only engaged with schooling whilst in custody (his reading level went up from a 7- to a 12-year old whilst in prison). Jay was due to sit three GCSE's after being released from prison, but it is unclear whether he obtained a qualification. He still had problems reading and writing. He stopped an introductory sports course at college after two months, because he had problems with his educational maintenance allowance (EMA). He then argued that he wanted to work instead. However, in the last ASSET he was unemployed for a long time and did not seem motivated to find work. He served long custodial sentences and continued to commit crimes when he was over 18.

#### **6.3.8 Comparing the four high offending/high vulnerability cases**

All *high offending/high vulnerability cases* experienced multiple risk factors at different levels of the ecological systems theory (See Tables 28,29 and 30). Ben, Harry and Jay all displayed severe

externalising behaviour problems, were prolific offenders, and it did not seem likely they would stop their criminal behaviour after their 18th birthday. Kevin's offences were the least severe and he displayed more internalising behaviour problems than the other three. All four had problems within their family, often starting at a very young age. The behaviour of these young people led to very disrupted school careers. Schools, in both countries, did not seem able to cope with the challenging behaviour. Both Harry and Jay (the English cases) were already attending a school for children with special needs, but even there they could not cope with their behaviour and they were frequently asked to leave early, were placed on a reduced timetable or received home tuition. Both Ben and Kevin (the Dutch cases) had to switch schools very often, which also led to long periods of not following education. None of the four *high offending/high vulnerability* absentees obtained a qualification (See Table 27) and most of them were either in prison or NEET in the last asset. So, although the response to Ben and Kevin (the Dutch cases) on the one hand and Harry and Jay (the English cases) on the other hand was different, the outcomes seemed very similar.

### **6.3.9 Key findings from the case descriptions**

The description of the 16 cases in four different groups shows that even though there are some differences between the four cases within the same group, the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour does seem to impact on the problems the serious or persistent absentees experience. The level of vulnerability seems to be connected quite strongly with experiencing problems within the family, whereas the level of offending behaviour can be associated with problems the serious or persistent absentees experience at the individual level. In addition, the case descriptions give insight into the interaction between risk factors within the same and within different microsystems of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Showing this interaction, which was sometimes mentioned by the serious or persistent absentee to the professional, sometimes an interpretation of the professional and sometimes followed out of the chronology of the different reports/ASSETS, is an important contribution to knowledge of these qualitative description of the cases. The next section will use the case studies to further compare the 16 cases with attention to the differences between the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour groups, and to the differences between Dutch and English cases.

## **6.4 Comparing the 16 cases**

What the above cases show is that serious or persistent absence from school is a complex and multi-faceted problem. For even within one and the same offending and/or vulnerability group, there were considerable differences between the various cases. This section moves on to discuss the differences and similarities between the four groups, elaborates the comparison between England

and the Netherlands and considers the impact of different responses to the serious or persistent absence from school.

#### **6.4.1 Differences and similarities between the groups**

Although absentees in all groups experienced risk factors at multiple levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory, there were differences between the groups both in the amount of risk factors and in which level or microsystem was most problematic. The description of the cases, in this respect, corroborated the findings in the previous chapter. Yet, the detailed descriptions did give better insight into the exact nature of the problems of some serious or persistent absentees. Moreover, by outlining in which area each absentee was most and first affected, the case studies shed light on the interplay between risk factors within the same and between different systems of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Which ecological system affected the serious or persistent absence from school and often initiated problems in other systems was different for the four groups based on the intersecting offending behaviour and vulnerability continua.

Tables 28, 29 and 30 give an overview of the problems the absentees in the four groups experienced at the individual level and within the family, school and peers microsystem. The four cases in the *primarily offending* and the *primarily vulnerable* group were quite homogenous with respect to which area the absentees experienced the most problems. The nature of the problems was still different, but for the *primarily vulnerable* absentees the family was clearly the most problematic microsystem, whereas absentees in the *primarily offending* group displayed severe externalising individual problems, which caused also problems within the microsystems school, peers and sometimes family. Both the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* and the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* groups on the other hand were more heterogeneous. Especially the four absentees in the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group had problems in different systems of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory. For most *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* cases, the main problems started either at the individual level or within the family, but the problems did spread out to school and peers.

Table 27 indicates that all *primarily offending* and *high offending/high vulnerability* case studies were male. This reflects the relative overrepresentation of males in these groups (See Chapter 5). What is more interesting, however, is that absentees in these groups were more likely to be excluded compared to absentees in the *primarily vulnerable* and *low offending behaviour/low vulnerability* groups, but that there was no clear difference between these groups in how often the absentees ended up not attending school for a longer period of time. The reason for this might be that in some cases mental health problems (more common among the vulnerable absentees than the offending behaviour absentees) were actually causing the young person to not attend school at

all, whilst in other cases the serious or persistent absentee was still on roll at a school, but often had to leave early due to behavioural problems. And whilst those young people may have gotten fixed-term exclusions multiple times, they could still attend school sporadically.

Table 28 gives an overview of problems at the individual level, but when looking at how different groups are affected a division could be made between internalising individual problems (like sleep and mental health problems) and externalising individual problems (such as behavioural problems and drug use). The *primarily vulnerable* absentees had more internalising problems than the other absentees, but as the above descriptions of the cases made clear these problems were often the result of the adverse family circumstances (such as abuse, neglect and parents with health or substance misuse problems) these absentees experienced. The *primarily offending* serious or persistent absentees, on the other hand, were all displaying severe behaviour problems. Their problematic behaviour also caused problems at school, with peers and sometimes in the family.

All serious or persistent absentees (apart from Rick) were having at least one risk factor at the family level (See Table 29). In many cases the biological parents were not living together anymore, but even more worrying was that many of the serious or persistent absentees did not have contact anymore with at least one of their biological parents. Table 29 further indicates that the *primarily offending* absentees clearly had to deal with the least problems within their families, whereas especially the *primarily vulnerable*, but also the *high offending/high vulnerability absentees* were experiencing an accumulation of different risk factors within the family microsystem. It were also these two groups, in which most of the absentees had at least one sibling who was a young offender or was serious or persistently absent from school as well. So, the accumulation of adverse family circumstances frequently impacted on more children within the same family.

Obviously, all serious or persistent absentees experienced problems at school. Table 30 provides an overview of risk factors at school and with peers. What stands out, is that none of the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* cases were struggling academically, whereas in all the other groups at least two absentees did not perform well at school. The descriptions above indicate that the extent of the problems ranged from not obtaining good grades to being unable to read and write. Many absentees in the *primarily offending* group and in the *high offending/high vulnerability* group had a bad relationship with their teachers. Especially the absentees in the latter group spent a lot of time outside the house with delinquent peers who were not attending school either (See Table 30). Those vulnerable absentees who also displayed problematic behaviour were often not welcome anymore at school (placed on a reduced timetable, home tuition or not on roll at a school at all), which gave them even more time to cause problems with their friends on the streets.



#### **6.4.2 Similarities and differences between Dutch and English persistent and serious absentees**

After establishing the differences between the groups of absentees based on their level of offending and vulnerability, it is worthwhile to concentrate on the distinctions between the cases in the two countries. Table 27 indicates that the Dutch absentees were more likely to start their absence from school by being often late. The case descriptions suggested that this was often related to sleep problems. This confirms the findings from the previous chapter, which already indicated that Dutch students reported sleep problems more often than English students. English students, on the other hand, were more likely to be excluded (fixed-term or permanently) from school and were more often on roll at a school for children with special needs. The second clear difference between Dutch and English absentees seems to be the number of offences they committed (See Table 27 and Chapter 5). Although it was already clear that English serious or persistent absentees committed more offences, the case descriptions indicate that the crimes they committed were also more severe than those of the Dutch serious or persistent absentees.

Ashley was the only English case study who did not use soft drugs, while in the Netherlands only three of the eight cases used soft drugs (See Table 28). In the Netherlands, only absentees high on the offending behaviour continuum used soft drugs, whereas it was present in all groups among the English cases. In addition some of the English absentees also used hard drugs. This confirms the finding from Chapter 5 that the use of drugs was more common among English absentees. Although most young people did use alcohol, before they were legally allowed to, only in one case the alcohol use was reported as excessive and created problems towards the daily functioning of the young person. Table 28 also indicates that whilst the Dutch case studies more often had mental health problems, more of the English case studies displayed behaviour problems. This was especially visible for the *low offending/low vulnerability* group, where both English cases had behaviour problems and no mental health problems and the Dutch cases showed no behaviour problems, but one of them did experience mental health issues.

Both the number and the type of problems absentees encountered within the family microsystem were fairly similar for English and Dutch absentees (See Table 29). In both countries, there was a lot of support available for the serious or persistent absentees and (in some cases) their families. In the Netherlands, professionals noticed that in many of the very vulnerable cases the young person was unwilling to cooperate with any form of support. Similarly, in England support was often only in place for a short period of time due to a lack of cooperation and/or motivation from the young person. In many cases, support was not only offered to the absentee but also to the family as a whole or (one of) the parents specifically. So, organisations who offered professional support (exosystems) were playing a part in the lives of serious or persistent absentees in both

countries, but the effect these organisations could create was very dependent on the motivation and cooperation of the young person (and their family).

The main difference between the English and the Dutch cases at school seemed to be in relation to having a connection with classmates and being bullied (See Table 30). Some of the Dutch cases specifically mentioned that they did not enjoy school, because they did not have a connection with their classmates. In addition, Lisa was bullied at school and Aart's mother also mentioned that he was being bullied, but school denied this. None of the eight English cases argued that being bullied was a reason for the serious or persistent absence from school, however, some of them did bully other children at school. Many of the selected cases in both countries spent a lot of time outside the house with friends who also had police involvements and were not attending school regularly (See Table 30). Yet, more of the Dutch cases just sat inside at home all day. This often coincided with mental health problems, such as depression.

#### **6.4.3 The effect of the (government) response and the offending/vulnerability group to the outcome for the serious or persistent absentee**

The legal response to the serious or persistent absence was quite similar for all the cases in the Netherlands. Almost all Dutch absentees received a conditional sentence with the special condition to follow the guidance of a youth probation officer. In the one case where no youth probation was imposed, it was specifically mentioned that this was only because a family guardian was already in place. In some other cases the absentee already had a youth probation officer (they were sentenced to youth probation after another offence), and therefore this was not imposed again and the young person received an unconditional community service sentence instead. Finally, a few of the absentees had to go to court multiple times, because of new or ongoing persistent absence from school. In these cases, they often received an unconditional sentence. In Cindy's case, the execution of an earlier conditional sentence was ordered. Eventually, Cindy even received a two day substitute custodial sentence, because she failed to complete the community service sentence. In three of the eight Dutch cases, the absentees were sentenced to an unconditional learning sentence. This was often in addition to a conditional sentence, so that youth probation could still be imposed. Only Aart's parents were prosecuted for his persistent absence from school; they were ordered to attend a learning sentence to learn how to be more effective in raising their child.

Imposing youth probation on serious or persistent absentees can be seen as a solving strategy, because it is quite an holistic approach to the problem. The youth probation officer sets up different forms of support for the young person to target the different problem areas of the young person and coordinates the support the young person receives from different organisations. Yet, the probation officer does also set a couple of specific goals at the start of the supervision, which means that the focus will be on improving those areas that are reflected in these goals. This

can be viewed as a taming strategy, because the setting of the goals takes away the complexity of the problem by not focusing on the interplay of different problem areas, but on improving the situation in the one, two or three most problematic areas. In practice, therefore, in the Netherlands the response to the serious or persistent absentee can be seen as a mixture of the solving and taming strategy that were distinguished by Daviter 2017 (See Chapter 1).

In the English case studies, two parents were held legally responsible for the absence of their child (This resulted in a final warning for Finley's parents and then Finley was placed in a secure unit, so no further action was taken against the parents. Holly's mother received 60 pounds costs and a 12 months conditional discharge sentence). Furthermore, two parents had received a parenting order for the offences one of their children had committed. Because it is not possible to legally respond to the serious or persistent absentee themselves, there were various other ways of responding to their serious or persistent absence (mainly at the school level). First of all, some young people switched to a different school (either another mainstream school or a special school). Furthermore, in many cases the absentees were placed on a reduced timetable, so that they only had to attend a couple of hours per day or week. Finally, both Finley and Jay received home tuition. The absentees who received home tuition or got a reduced timetable were high on the offending continuum, in many of the other cases the exact response to the young person (apart from switching school) was unclear. So, in England in each case many different organisations (such as CAMHS, schools, the court (for the parents) etc.) can respond to the serious or persistent absentee and/or the family. This seems in line with what Daviter (2017) called the coping strategy (See Chapter 1).

So, although the in-depth case studies showed a wide variety of risk factors between the different cases, the response (at face value) looked fairly similar for most serious or persistent absentees, especially in the Netherlands. However, the youth probation officer would set out some targets at the start of the guidance, which focussed on the specific situation of the young person. To obtain these targets, the appropriate support of professional organisations would then be sought. The youth probation officer, therefore, tries to individualise the response to the specific needs of each persistent or serious absentee. The question remains, however, how effective the different ways of responding to serious or persistent absence from school in each of the countries are.

In both countries, the two *low offending behaviour/low vulnerability* cases managed to obtain a qualification (See Table 27). In the Netherlands, these absentees were already working in the last report (one part-time and one full-time), and in England both young people were planning to go to college (after having obtained their GCSE's). So for the case studies in this group, the short-term outcome was positive in both countries. It was a more mixed picture for the *primarily*

*offending* serious or persistent absentees. In the Netherlands, they both did obtain a qualification, but one of them found it hard at the vocational course, because he was missing the structure and guidance he received at secondary school and as a result dropped out. The other did obtain a vocational qualification and was planning to start a new course to obtain a vocational qualification of a higher level. In England, for one of the cases from the *primarily offending* group it remained unclear whether he obtained any GCSE's and the other was NEET for over a year in the last ASSET. So the Dutch *primarily offending* cases did do better than the English ones on the short term outcomes.

None of the young people who were high on the vulnerability continuum (so both the *primarily* vulnerable cases and the *high offending behaviour/high vulnerability* cases) in both countries managed to obtain a qualification (Although for some it was unclear, because they were still (supposed to be) in school in the last ASSET, See Table 27). Although for one young person in the Netherlands, the situation had clearly improved (he was volunteering and planning to do a vocational qualification course), the overall picture showed a negative outcome for those vulnerable young people. Most of them were NEET for quite some time in the last report/ASSET. So, in these cases the response did not seem very effective. The case files indicated that it was difficult to get these very vulnerable serious or persistent absentees to cooperate with the support they were offered. Furthermore, especially for those young people who scored high on both the offending and the vulnerability continuum, both professional support and schooling were often disrupted by their behaviour or placements in different care settings or custody. In conclusion, especially the placement of a young person on the vulnerability continuum seems to be a good indicator for the short term outcomes of the serious or persistent absentee. Being classed as not very vulnerable (i.e. not being taken into care), seemed to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome for the young person.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

Almost all serious or persistent absentees experienced multiple risk factors at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This chapter illustrates in more depth the overall findings from the previous chapter that the differences between the groups were twofold. Firstly, especially those absentees high on the vulnerability continuum often had to deal with far more risk factors than absentees in other groups. Secondly, the areas in which absentees encountered most problems differed between the groups. Yet, this chapter complements the findings from the previous chapter, because the in-depth description of the specific nature of and interaction between the risk factors gives more insight into the dynamics both within and between the different systems of Bronfenbrenner's theory.

The dynamics between different microsystems or some microsystems and the individual level were most visible for the *primarily offending* and the *primarily vulnerable* group, because these groups were more homogenous than the *high offending/high vulnerability* and especially the *low offending/low vulnerability* groups. For the absentees in the *primarily offending* groups, the main issue was the externalising problem behaviour they displayed. This often resulted in many problems in other areas as well, especially at school and with peers. The *primarily vulnerable* absentees, on the other hand, often had to deal with such difficult family circumstances (starting already at a very young age) that this affected them in many other areas. Many of them developed internalising mental health and sleep problems as a result of the problems within their family. The *high offending behaviour/high vulnerability* absentees frequently displayed both many risk factors at the family level and externalising behaviour problems, but there were differences between them in what the main problem area seemed to be. Finally, all four *low offending behaviour/ low vulnerability* cases experienced fewer risk factors compared to most absentees in the other groups, but each of these four absentees had a different most problematic area.

The place on the vulnerability continuum seemed crucial for the eventual outcome of the serious or persistent absentee. None of the eight highly vulnerable cases (so both the *primarily vulnerable* and the *high offending/high vulnerability absentees*) obtained a qualification. Whilst in England also none of the absentees who were high on the offending behaviour continuum managed to obtain a qualification, in the Netherlands both *primarily offending* cases did obtain a qualification. This corroborates the findings from Chapter 5, which also indicated a strong influence of the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour on the short-term outcomes. The accumulation of risk factors many absentees experience suggest that the absence from school is a sign that the young person is experiencing many problems. It might, therefore, be difficult to completely solve the problem, which means that governments could consider to focus on taming or coping instead (Daviter, 2017). The case descriptions also indicate that both countries struggle to create a positive change for the *highly vulnerable* serious or persistent absentees. This suggests that the response that is adopted in both countries to very vulnerable absentees is not suitable for policy transfer between England and the Netherlands. The next chapter will focus on the views of professionals in each country to establish how they define the problem, and perhaps more importantly what they believe to be effective in responding to serious or persistent absence from school.

## **Chapter 7: Comparing professional views on serious or persistent absence from school**

### **7.1 Introduction**

Serious or persistent absence from school receives considerable attention from a range of professionals in both England and the Netherlands. Over the years, governments (in both countries) have set out different schemes and plans on how to deal with serious or persistent absence from school. The complexity of the problem, the vulnerability of the absentees and the link with offending behaviour, after all, pose a considerable challenge for governments to find an effective way of responding to serious or persistent absentees and their parents. But the question is how professionals working in the field of serious or persistent absence from school experience these policy changes and how they define the problem. Moreover, what is in their opinion the most effective way of responding to serious or persistent absentees and/or their parents. This chapter will address these issues, by comparing the views of six Dutch and six English professionals.

The initial recognition of an attendance problem rests with the school; yet in both countries a range of agencies include responding to serious or persistent absence from school within their remit. There were no professionals who worked within a school interviewed, because the main focus of this project is not on the reaction of schools, but on the response of different agencies that become involved after schools have reported the serious or persistent absence from school to the local authority. The comparative chapter set out the differences between the two countries in which agencies respond to serious or persistent absentees and/or their parents and which measures these agencies can take (See Chapter 3 Table 11). This also means that professionals working with serious or persistent absentees have different roles in the two countries. Therefore, the Dutch and English professionals interviewed for this research project did not have completely comparable roles, but they were all working in the field of serious or persistent absence from school. The professionals interviewed were:

#### **Rotterdam:**

- Interviewee 1, Case investigator at the RVDK in Rotterdam
- Interviewee 2, Youth probation officer in Rotterdam
- Interviewee 3, Youth probation officer in Rotterdam
- Interviewee 4, Education welfare officer in Rotterdam
- Interviewee 5, Education welfare officer in Rotterdam
- Interviewee 6, Case coordinator at the RVDK in Rotterdam

**Portsmouth:**

Interviewee 7, YOT-Education link worker in Portsmouth

Interviewee 8, Admissions, Exclusions and Reintegration manager in Portsmouth

Interviewee 9, YOT case worker in Portsmouth

Interviewee 10, YOT practice leader in Portsmouth

Interviewee 11, Manager of the School Attendance Team in Portsmouth

Interviewee 12, Project worker at Barnardos in Portsmouth

Since these roles are quite different, a brief overview of how serious or persistent absence is noticed and responded to in both Rotterdam and Portsmouth will now follow. This will illustrate how each of the interviewed professionals in Rotterdam and Portsmouth comes across serious or persistent absence from school in their job.

In the Netherlands, schools report absence from school to the education welfare service of the council. Education welfare officers will then have a meeting with the young person and (in some cases) the parents. When the absence continues, the education welfare officer can decide to report the young person to the prosecution service. The prosecution service will decide whether or not to prosecute the young person on the basis of the report of the education welfare officer. Two Dutch education welfare officers were interviewed, because the education welfare service is (after the school) the first agency who becomes involved with the absentees. When an education welfare officer chooses to report a serious or persistent absentee to the prosecution service and the absentee does get prosecuted, the case will be referred to the RVDK, who will then start an investigation that results in a sentence advice to the judge. A case investigator and a case coordinator at the RVDK were interviewed, because they come across all pupils that are being prosecuted because of their serious or persistent absence from school. Furthermore, the RVDK also performs a case investigation to give a sentence advice to a judge for young offenders, therefore these professionals could probably compare serious or persistent absentees with young offenders. The judge often sentences the serious or persistent absentees to a conditional community service sentence. The special condition is in most cases to observe the guidance of the youth probation service. Therefore, two youth probation officers, with a considerable amount of persistent absentees in their caseload, were also interviewed. They have a good knowledge of the issues many persistent absentees experience and how to deal with these effectively.

In Portsmouth, the city council handles the cases of serious or persistent absence from school. The school attendance team is responsible for the prosecution of the parents. Therefore, the manager of this team was interviewed. The manager of the admissions, exclusions and

reintegration team was interviewed, because this team deals with children who are hard to place, and thereby comes across many serious or persistent absentees. In Portsmouth, a relatively new role was created to ensure better cooperation between the education and the youth offending department. This YOT-education link worker was interviewed, since these departments both come across serious or persistent absence from school. In addition, a YOT case worker and YOT practice leader were interviewed, because many of the young offenders in their caseload are also serious or persistent absentees. They could, therefore, compare young offenders with and without attendance problems. Finally, a project worker at Barnardo's was interviewed, because there are many serious or persistent absentees in the families he is working with as part of the Troubled Families project.

So, in each country, a range of professionals was interviewed. As mentioned in Chapter 4, semi-structured interviews were conducted to get an in-depth understanding of professionals' views on a range of topics related to serious or persistent absence from school (See Appendix B for the interview schedule). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews (See Appendix C for an example of the coding process). This chapter will report the results of the thematic analysis of the interviews with professionals.

## **7.2 Defining the problem**

All interviewed professionals come across serious or persistent absence from school at a regular basis. It is interesting, therefore, to explore to what extent professionals within the same country and across the two countries had similar views about the causes of serious or persistent absence from school. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Chapter 1 Figure 3) would suggest that many factors at different levels may be of influence on absence from school. The question remains, however, whether professionals emphasised the influence of macrosystems, mesosystems, microsystems, the individual absentee or a mixture of these. Since the emphasis professionals in each of the countries place on a certain system of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory could reflect how serious or persistent absence from school manifests itself in each of the countries. By describing what professionals (in both countries) believed a typical absentee looks like and what according to them are causes of serious or persistent absence from school, the next section will address the similarities and differences between Dutch and English serious or persistent absentees as seen by professionals.

### **7.2.1 Is there a typical absentee?**

Some professionals did not believe that there was such a thing as a typical persistent absentee. Two of them argued that you cannot speak of typical, because these absentees are all children and individuals in their own right:



*“No, I don’t believe there is a typical one, because every individual is different. Everyone carries their own backpack [this is a Dutch expression, which could be translated as has their own baggage], which results in their absence from school”* (Interviewee 5, Education welfare officer in Rotterdam)

An English project worker at Barnardo’s (interviewee 12), on the other hand, just thought that there are no typical absentees. He believed that both genders and all ages are equally affected.

Most professionals, however, did give a description of what they thought to be typical for persistent absentees. These descriptions give a good insight in what professionals believe to be the most common situation for serious or persistent absence to occur in. For example, interviewee 7 described it in the following way:

*“Generally there is a behavioural issue, generally they come from a lower economic background and generally they are in a family where the parents attitudes towards aspiration are a lot lower, if anything at all”* (Interviewee 7, YOT-Education link worker in Portsmouth)

By pointing towards behavioural problems, the low socio-economic background and problems within the family, this professional mentioned many of the key factors that were established in the research evidence (See Chapter 2). Two Dutch professionals gave a very short description of persistent absentees. They saw them as *“overburdened”* (interviewee 1, case investigator at the RVDK) or *“pitiful”* (interviewee 6) children. Interviewee 6 further explained this:

*“serious absentees are often pitiful children, with lots of issues, where you have to dig deep to find out what these issues are”* (Interviewee 6, Case coordinator at the RVDK in Rotterdam)

These professionals were clearly emphasising the vulnerability of serious or persistent absentees. Interviewee 3 concurred that it is often very hard to discover what the exact underlying problems of the absentees are. So, cases of serious or persistent absence are often very complex; it is clear that the young person is very vulnerable, but it is also difficult to pinpoint what exactly is causing the absence from school. Not only Dutch professionals, however, pointed towards the vulnerability of serious or persistent absentees. Interviewee 8 clearly indicated that not attending school on a regular basis is enough to make all absentees vulnerable:

*“So, I think all of the ones that fall into the category of persistent absenteeism are vulnerable to some extent, and that is because actually school is so much more than just the academic thing. It is about the social aspect, the realization that whilst you can be different, there is a level of conformity that society requires and all that sort of elements of it.”* (Interviewee 8, Admissions, Exclusions and Reintegration manager in Portsmouth)

So, where the Dutch professionals believed absentees are often vulnerable due to problems they experience in different environments, this English professional argued that not attending school in itself actually leads to vulnerability.

Both Dutch youth probation officers emphasised that absentees were often girls with internalising problems. The only English professional referring to one particular gender described persistent absentees as follows:

*“predominantly male, I would see a boy, I would see a year 9, year 10 boy in my head and I would say that they are someone who comes from a family that is not that bothered about school. You know it is not that they are saying don’t go, but it is just they are not assisting with that. I think it is someone who is perhaps a bit too much left to their own devices and have been for X amount of time, so that has just become the norm, I go out to work the time I like, I pretty much amuse myself, and so school has become less important to me, because no one is sort of giving it a purpose.”* (interviewee 8, Admissions, Exclusions and Reintegration manager in Portsmouth)

So, where some of the Dutch professionals thought primarily of females when describing typical absence, this professional believed absentees to be predominantly male. This English professional also mentioned a lack of value of education within the family in this quote; far more English professionals believed this to be one of the causes for absence from school than Dutch professionals.

So, when you combine all the descriptions that professionals in both countries gave of typical persistent absentees, many of the known risk factors in research evidence were being discussed. First and foremost, both English and Dutch professionals stressed the vulnerability of persistent absentees. Some described this vulnerability very explicitly (see the above quotes), but others pointed to this vulnerability more implicitly by underlining the multitude of problems typical absentees are facing. Secondly, mainly Dutch professionals emphasised the complexity of persistent absence from school when discussing typical absentees. They noted that it is often clear

these young people are suffering, but it is very hard to pinpoint what exactly is going on. Finally, some of the English professionals suggested that persistent absence from school is often transferred from generation to generation due to complete families who do not appreciate the value of education. In the next section, some of these typical characteristics of serious or persistent absentees will be elaborated on in more detail when professional views on the causes of serious or persistent absence from school are discussed.

### 7.2.2 Causes

Almost all professionals mentioned that there was usually ‘*a lot going on*’ in the lives of serious or persistent absentees and that there is not one single cause for persistent absence from school. Interviewee 2 stated that:

*“Often there are all sorts of problems, which ensures that they [persistent absentees] cannot concentrate at school, do not want to be in school, because they are otherwise occupied. And these problems, which differ per situation [absentee], is what we focus on to decide how to intervene so that these problems decrease and they [the absentees] can be at school again.”* (Interviewee 2, Youth probation officer in Rotterdam)

Most of the causes or problems discussed by the professionals were at the individual, microsystem or mesosystem level of Bronfenbrenner’s theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3). Especially the Dutch professionals focused solely on influences on serious or persistent absence from school close to the individual. Some of the English professionals did sporadically talk about causes further away from the individual. For example, interviewee 10 clearly referred to the chronosystem in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory when he described the main reason for absence from school:

*“When young people become absent from school, whether they are young offenders or whether it is a young person going through some, I always think about it if either young people stopped going to school, it is because some traumatic experience happened.”* (Interviewee 10, YOT practice leader in Portsmouth)

So, he argued that the onset of absence from school is usually the direct result of a traumatic event in the life of that young person, which could be at the individual level or within the family or at

school. Interviewee 11 suggested that persistent absence is mainly a demographic and a cultural problem:

*“I think one of the biggest issues that we have in the country, I think that people have, it is the value of what education can do to them and to their children and giving them greater life opportunities. If you don’t believe the education system actually gives you something in life, then [...] its worth is useless to you.”* (Interviewee 11, Manager of the School Attendance Team in Portsmouth)

He further explained that employers now really want qualifications, and therefore not valuing education is a bigger problem nowadays than it used to be. This could be seen as a macrosystem-influence on persistent absence from school (in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory), because he argued that in certain demographics in England people are more likely to not understand the value of education. So, some English professionals did consider the impact of systems that are more distant from the individual. Most causes described by the professionals in both countries, however, seem to be very close to the individual. Therefore, the factors professionals believed to play a role at the individual level and in different microsystems will now be discussed in more detail.

#### *Individual*

Dutch professionals tended to link more factors at the individual level to serious or persistent absence from school than English professionals. The most commonly mentioned factor was a lack of intrinsic motivation. This was often linked to not being at the right school or school level. Both interviewees 4 and 5 argued that some young people are not motivated because they attend a school at a too high level, which means they become overstretched. Other young people attend a school at a too low level, which leads to being insufficiently challenged and boredom. An English professional took this a step further by arguing:

*“And there are certain young people that a school/academic environment is not right for them, so why force it?”* (Interviewee 7, YOT-Education Link worker in Portsmouth)

So, he not only said that some people might not be in the right school, but suggested that attending school might not be right at all for certain young people. One of the Dutch youth probation officers (interviewee 3) indicated that she came across some young people who just did not want to attend school. She argued that this was in some cases just a phase and a symptom of puberty. Accordingly,

she experienced a positive change in some cases over the period she worked with the young person (usually 1 or 2 years), because they matured and got more motivated about their schooling when puberty ended.

Internalising problems experienced by the serious or persistent absentees was another factor that was commonly discussed by the professionals. These internalising problems were sometimes linked specifically to girls and consist of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, low self-esteem, feeling insecure or in other ways just not feeling at ease. The difficulty with these internalising problems that some absentees suffer from is that:

*“it is sometimes quite difficult to unpick that and find out what’s actually going on.”*

(Interviewee 12, Project worker at Barnardos in Portsmouth).

Linked to these internalising problems are the psychosomatic complaints that some serious absentees seem to have. Interviewee 6 discussed these as follows:

*“You also see by many children (...) that they have many physical complaints, but when they go to see a general practitioner, the general practitioner cannot find anything, but they do feel a lot.”* (Interviewee 6, Case coordinator at the RVDK in Rotterdam)

And these physical complaints are a reason for these children to stay home in bed instead of attending school.

Externalising problems were, on the other hand, commonly linked to boys and brought up more often by the English professionals compared to the Dutch professionals. Externalising problems refer to both general behaviour problems and actual delinquent behaviour. These behaviours might lead to serious or persistent absence from school, because school tends to become less important for these young people when they are busy with other stuff. Interviewee 3 explained this in the following way:

*“The boys who end up in the criminality, so who are busy with other things; when you are constantly drug running or committing robbery’s, you will not have time to attend school anymore.”* (Interviewee 3, Youth probation officer in Rotterdam)

Another factor at the individual level is the cognitive and social skills of the absentees. Only Dutch professionals discussed this factor, but there seem to be different sides to it. Both education welfare officers in Rotterdam and a youth probation officer pointed out that quite a few of the

serious or persistent absentees have difficulties telling the time, often due to having a low IQ, which leads to them being late at school:

*“some children find it hard to estimate what time it is, and thereby leave too late from home or get distracted by all sorts of things on their way to school which causes them to be late for school”* (Interviewee 4, Education welfare officer in Rotterdam)

Interviewee 1 (case investigator at the RVDK), on the other hand, focused more on how these absentees get cognitively behind. She stated that when there is a lot of misery surrounding a young person, it is hard for that young person to concentrate on school work and cognitive development. This is a good example of reciprocal determinism as defined by Bandura (1986) in his social cognitive theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 4), because it suggests a link between environmental influences and cognitive factors.

Only interviewee 9 (YOT case worker in Portsmouth) spoke about substance abuse of the young person as a possible cause for serious or persistent absence from school. The professionals were not asked specifically about the prevalence of substance misuse among serious or persistent absentees, but since it did come up a lot in the case files (See Chapter 5), it is surprising that only one of the professionals did mention it as a cause.

### *Family*

Almost all professionals pointed towards the influence of the family on serious or persistent absence from school. The overriding argument seemed to be that within most families there is a lack of structure and organisation which impacts on the school attendance of the young people:

*“I think the fundamental issue that we have is that fragmented families tend to have very complicated, very chaotic lives, and in that circumstance I don’t think [...] that education is really important. I always link it to, with a lot of the families we deal with, if you came to a crossroad and it said easy route or hard route, they would choose the hard route, because their logic doesn’t seem to compute that there is an easy way. Their lives are very chaotic and education is very well down their ladder of things that need to be dealt with.”*  
(Interviewee 11, Manager of the School Attendance Team in Portsmouth)

In this quote fragmented families were mentioned, and there are other professionals who pointed towards family changes or single-parent families that struggle. Yet, numerous other causes were brought up by the professionals that could explain how and why these families lacked structure.

Professionals predominantly identified overburdened and overstretched parents, who were too busy with their own issues and therefore could not support their children to attend school on time every day, as an umbrella cause for serious or persistent absence from school. Interviewee 6 (Case coordinator at the RVDK) argued that these parents, just as their children, “are drowning in their own problems” and interviewee 1 described it as follows:

*“But also children who are living in an environment in which it is just not going well, parents are overburdened and provide little supervision, they are emotionally unavailable, and I see that as a cause.”* (Interviewee 1, Case investigator at the RVDK in Rotterdam)

Some professionals gave examples of the problems that parents of serious or persistent absentees are experiencing. Many families struggle financially, according to these professionals. Families of serious or persistent absentees are often living on benefits or have an income just above that. Furthermore, in many cases there are debts within the family. However, two of the Dutch professionals seemed to disagree about the extent to which a lack of money was a direct reason for the young person to not attend school. The case investigator at the RVDK (interviewee 1) suggested that there were some young people who could not afford the costs of the journey to school (i.e. public transport costs) and therefore stayed home. One of the youth probation officers (interviewee 3), on the other hand, acknowledged the financial problems of the families, but clearly indicated that this did not affect the general attendance of the young person. She argued that it only led to young people not attending school days when there was a paid activity (such as a school trip to an attraction park), because the government funds most of the ‘normal’ costs of schooling. However, they both agreed that many parents are worried about their finances and debts and that this has an impact on the serious or persistent absence from school. Most English professionals linked the financial problems of the families to them living in deprived neighbourhoods.

Addiction of (one of the) parents is another factor that professionals viewed as adding to the worries of the family and the young person. None of the Dutch professionals mentioned addiction as a cause, while the case file analysis did indicate this as a problem in both countries (See Chapter 5). One of the two English professionals who discussed addiction only spoke about drugs or alcohol misuse, whereas the other also included the possibility of it being an addiction to shopping, gambling or smoking.

The case file analysis in both countries showed that physical abuse, neglect and domestic violence is quite common within the families of the serious or persistent absentees in both countries (See Chapter 5). Yet, only interviewee 8 (Admissions, Exclusions and Reintegration manager in Portsmouth) mentioned these problems as a possible cause for absence from school

during the interview. He argued that in some cases, it was not of a level that social care was involved, but he felt it could still impact on serious or persistent absence from school.

Finally, the majority of the Dutch professionals suggested that some children had to take a caring role in the family, while none of the English professionals discussed this. According to the Dutch professionals, some absentees have to babysit or take care of younger brothers and sisters, care for one of their parents, or have to assist parents when they attend medical appointments and are therefore unable to attend school. Interviewee 4 explained it as follows:

*“they basically are children who were assigned an adult role”* (Interviewee 4, Education welfare officer in Rotterdam)

So, professionals, both in England and the Netherlands, indicated that many parents struggle to set boundaries and impose consequences on the behaviour of their children. And while the professionals gave various and different reasons for the lack of structure within the families, it was clear from almost all interviews that professionals working in the field of persistent or serious absence from school do believe that the family and/or the parents of absentees do play a vital role in the onset, progression and existence of serious or persistent absence from school.

### *Schools*

According to professionals in both countries schools have a big impact on serious or persistent absence from school. The most important factor, according to the professionals, is how quickly schools notice the absence of a young person and how quickly they act after having detected the absence. Interviewee 8 explained this as follows:

*“And that, but that is not just about what the school can do, but it is about what the school can commission at the right time to do those things. And I think in the good schools, because they have an effective eye, they are closely monitoring those that are late, those that are having more than their fair share of medical appointments, those that could go on to reduced timetables. I think the good schools monitor that really carefully and I don’t think you are gonna have many reduced timetables, because they attack the lates really quick, you know it is the early identification and that sort of thing, actually they are going to pick up a number of those who then won’t slip into that.”* (Interviewee 8, Admissions, Exclusions and Reintegration manager in Portsmouth)



Dutch professionals argued that schools are making it easy for the young person when their absence goes unnoticed at first or seems to be without any consequences. Professionals also agreed that if action is only taken once the absence has already progressed, it is often too late, and very difficult to get these children back into school:

*“Usually they only discover it when the absence is already quite substantial, well and then it becomes very complicated to get the young person back into the class in the middle of the year, because the class will obviously react as well and that usually is not the nice reaction a teenager would like when returning to school. So that makes it very easy [for the young person] to say again well I feel ill...”* (Interviewee 6, Case coordinator at the RVDK in Rotterdam)

So professionals in both countries were quite adamant about the need to carefully record absence from school and to act when the absence is still in the early stages. According to some of the Dutch professionals, the school structure and organisation has a considerable impact on how effective schools are in tackling absence at an early stage. Three factors were mentioned in this respect: Firstly, the size of the school, with smaller schools deemed to be more effective in dealing with the onset of absence from school than larger schools. Secondly, schools with a special absence-coordinator seemed to do better than schools where individual teachers or mentors have to deal with absence from school on top of their other tasks. Finally, the bond of the young person with the mentor or care-coordinator at the school was described as a possible influence on the quick detection of absence from school.

Professionals, especially in the Netherlands, indicated that in many cases schools should communicate better with parents and notify them earlier when their child is not attending school. On the other hand, they acknowledged that often both the school and the parents could be blamed for the lack of communication between them. Interviewee 2 put this as follows:

*“But in some cases, schools don’t call at all when a child is absent. Well then both sides are culpable, mother maybe has little contact with the school, but school also doesn’t let mother know that the child is not in. And then it sometimes, in bizarre cases, goes on for months that the child isn’t attending school and no one knows.”* (interviewee 2, Youth probation officer in Rotterdam)

This quote refers to the relationship between two microsystems (school and family) surrounding the individual absentee, and therefore is a mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems

theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3). Two other professionals, the Dutch case coordinator (interviewee 6) and the English family intervention worker (interviewee 12) pointed out that schools are often not aware or do not take into account how they can best contact the families, because they send letters, texts or use voicemails, while these families are so busy with their own problems that these messages from school are often not received. Interviewee 12 worded this as follows:

*“and they have worked with the family taking into consideration the sort of communication styles of the family really, you know are the family receiving text messages you know, because I notice schools send a lot of text messages to the families, but I know that a lot of my families don’t read their text messages, because I send text messages and I don’t hear back from them, so I will try another you know a lot of times I will just go and call the family, go and see them, cause then I know that I will be able to talk to somebody.”* (interviewee 12, project worker at Barnardo’s in Portsmouth)

So, according to the professionals there clearly seems to be mismatch between school and families, and they often blame each other for the lack of communication.

Although many professionals believed registering and tackling absence when it is still at an early stage to be the main impact schools can have on the development of serious or persistent absence from school, some other factors at the school level were also mentioned. It is important, according to the professionals, that pupils like attending school, they should be enjoying their selves and have a good experience at school. And for many persistent absentees this just does not seem to be the case. Some professionals indicated that they did come across young people who did not want to attend school anymore due to being bullied. Yet, more professionals (in both countries) suggested that many absentees just were not in the right school; this could be because the school was unable to meet their behavioural needs or because they were not attending a school at the right level (mainly in the Netherlands). An English professional said the following about this:

*“I think schools need to be doing more, because these are the pupils that will slip through the net. I think if you are in a mainstream school, I know there is processes in place to deal with them, but I would imagine very quickly they get sort of shipped out to what we call in Portsmouth the Harbour school, so a behavioural and learning needs school. And I think unfortunately those schools aren’t fit for purpose either, I don’t think they are meeting the behavioural needs of some of their pupils.”* (Interviewee 9, YOT case worker in Portsmouth)

There were more professionals in both countries who suggested that some schools do prioritise children who are likely to do well in their exams over children who for whatever reason might be unable to get good exam results. In the Netherlands, a professional illustrated how some children who start secondary school at a relatively high level dropped a number of levels in just a few years' time:

*"What you often see at schools who offer the higher levels is that when children have behaviour problems, that in my view schools then often do not address these problems enough, but often just say well if you keep behaving like this and the result is that your grades are bad, that schools then do not focus on tackling the behaviour problems but on the bad grades.[...] Well and then the pupil ends up at the lower level, often does not have a connection with the other pupils, because those are pupils who do have that level. Yes, I think you can fill in yourself what will happen next."* (Interviewee 4, Education welfare officer in Rotterdam)

Although the English school system is not a tracked system like the Dutch system (See Chapter 3), a professional in Portsmouth described something similar:

*"And because it sets for schools, if that young person is not going to get high grade GCSE's and potentially bring down the overall school score, and they get, like I said earlier on, they get to year 11 and they are not going to achieve, a quiet good bye, child taken off the exam roll, allowed to drift away. Nobody is challenging on it, nobody is actually taking a school to task. And because of that, that is where the persistent absenteeism comes, does it start and continues."* (Interviewee 10, YOT practice leader in Portsmouth)

Dutch professionals pointed out that the prevalence of serious or persistent absence from school was much higher at the lower levels of the Dutch system compared to the higher levels.

*"I do believe that children at the lower levels are more vulnerable."* (Interviewee 4, Education welfare officer in Rotterdam)

Even though in England schools do not offer education at different levels, it could still be possible that children who are educationally behind or have learning difficulties are more likely to become serious or persistent absentees, yet none of the English professionals mentioned this specifically as a possible cause.

Finally, one Dutch professional and two English professionals underlined that the rules of some schools or the ways in which some schools deal with vulnerable young people are not being helpful in tackling serious or persistent absence from school. The English professionals, for example, believed that reduced timetables were not helpful in every situation:

*“sometimes if a school has a young person who's behaviour is not good, there is almost a temptation to initiate what is called a reduced timetable: reduced hours of attendance. And I personally feel that is been overused far too much by the schools.[...] I think sometimes it is too easy for schools to get rid of the problem by reducing the young person's hours.”*  
(Interviewee 7, YOT-education link worker in Portsmouth)

The case coordinator of the RVDK (interviewee 6) argued that the punitive measures some schools use for children who break the rules are actually increasing absence from school. Some schools, according to interviewee 6, respond to children's behaviour by telling them they can only return to school after their parents have attended a meeting at school. However, many of these parents just do not show up for a meeting and then the child is not allowed to attend school. She, therefore, believed that this response actually made the situation worse instead of better.

So the predominant view amongst the professionals in both countries was that schools can make a real difference in the onset and existence of serious or persistent absence from school and that some schools are dealing better with young people on the verge of becoming serious or persistent absentees than other schools. Therefore, they believed that schools have an impact on serious or persistent absence from school.

#### *Neighbourhood and peers*

Two microsystems are placed together in this section (neighbourhood and peers), because many professionals seemed to connect the two to each other without being prompted to do so. Basically they treated these two microsystem as a mesosystem where the neighbourhood a young person lives in has a big influence on the role that peers play. One of the English professionals discussed this as follows:

*“I am not suggesting those that live on a council estate are any worse or any better than those who live in an affluent society, because their thought processes are completely different but they still may hold the same principles. But you are more likely I think the lower you are down the scale to be influenced and also in some respect take on the mentality of*

*where you live and the peer pressure of the people around you, than when you are in an affluent area.” (Interviewee 11, Manager of the School Attendance Team in Portsmouth)*

So, if you are not living in a very good neighbourhood, it is quite likely that contact with peers in the same neighbourhood leads to you taking over the neighbourhood mentality. A Dutch professional linked it more clearly to absence from school when discussing the impact of living in a neighbourhood with a lower socio-economic status:

*“When you live in a street where that [where many families with a lower socio-economic status live] is the case everywhere, and you walk to school together with the neighbour boys, but they remain standing, then you will stay hanging together, so I think it is about being influenced. Plus it is intelligence and social intelligence.” (Interviewee 3, Youth probation officer in Rotterdam)*

Both these quotes indicate that apart from the link between the neighbourhood and the peers of the young person, the sensitivity of the young person to being influenced is another major factor. Some of the Dutch professionals spoke about young people who are easily influenced and become involved in peer groups that have a negative impact on them, because they want to act tough. An education welfare officer described how mainly children with a very low IQ could easily get dragged into criminality:

*“What I see, for example, at my ‘Praktijkschool’ [a school for children with learning difficulties] is that quite a lot, both boys and girls that does not really matter, end up in a bad circuit because of their level. [...] Yes, and also acting tough, because you are not very smart on paper and it is not going so well at school, so you will show at another level what you do and do not dare.” (Interviewee 4, Education welfare officer in Rotterdam)*

This was not the only professional who linked the role of peers not only to absence from school but also to the offending behaviour of the young person. Professionals in both Portsmouth and Rotterdam discussed this relationship (the views of professionals on the connection between absence from school and offending behaviour will be discussed in more depth in the next section). Some English professionals suggested (interviewee 7 and 9) that the peer group became a real problem once children were put into special provision. Interviewee 9 described this as follows:

*“I would say once you get to the Harbour school most definitely, because it is all the naughty children together. And once one sparks to go another will quite often go. We do find that on our caseload, that a lot of young people will run together from school, and if all are having a good day, all could stay in school.”* (Interviewee 9, YOT case worker in Portsmouth)

So according to the professionals the magnitude of the impact of the peer group on young people becoming serious or persistent absentees depends on the neighbourhood the young person lives in, the school or facility the young person attends and how easily the young person is influenced by peers.

### *Government*

Professionals were specifically asked about the role they thought the state or government played in the onset and existence of serious or persistent absence from school. The answers were very divergent and a lot of the professionals, in both countries, acknowledged they found this question hard to answer. It seemed to be more difficult for them, because it is further away from the direct cases they come across on a day-to-day basis. This suggests that most professionals find it easier to discuss factors at the individual or microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3) than factors at the exosystem or macrosystem level.

When prompted, professionals tended to view the emphasis placed on schooling and obtaining qualifications in policies and law, the way education is organised, and how school attendance is being enforced as the main ways in which the state can affect absence from school. Many Dutch professionals believed that in the Netherlands the focus is more on compulsory education and obtaining qualifications compared to other Western countries. Interviewee 6 clarified this as follows:

*“Well, I think that here in the Netherlands we really insist on the importance of obtaining a qualification, a start-qualification, that that is just key for your development and your future and that it is firmly deployed that every young person has to ensure to attend such education or schooling to be able to obtain a qualification or a start-qualification. And I do believe that we are one of the countries who are at the forefront in that respect.”* (Interviewee 6, Case coordinator at the RVDK in Rotterdam)

Interviewee 5, spoke about the way in which a state organises education and its effects on serious or persistent absence from school:

*“We do not have home education here, and in America they do have home education, so it is just how that is arranged and what one believes to be important or not, so in that manner the government certainly plays a part in that.”* (Interviewee 5, Education welfare officer in Rotterdam)

The two English professionals, interviewees 8 and 9, who discussed what the government could do via policy thought it was mainly about regulating what schools are doing:

*“I do think there is a role for them [the state] there, but I think that role needs to be put on to the schools and the schools to be engaging more.”* (Interviewee 9, YOT case worker in Portsmouth)

Only Dutch professionals (interviewee 1, 3 and 6) mentioned that an important task for the government is to ensure that the law on compulsory education is enforced. According to interviewee 1 it is essential that:

*“the government is on top of it and clamps down on it”* (Interviewee 1, Case investigator at the RVDK in Rotterdam)

She further explained that parents who do not take their responsibility should be addressed and that being on top of it enables the government to tackle the problem preventative.

The three factors discussed above were mentioned by multiple professionals. Yet, some professionals identified other ways in which the state has an impact on school absence as well. For example, interviewee 7 described that there was a certain negative influence of the state due to the austerity policy:

*“The cuts in the public sector, the cuts in services for young people, they have definitely affected it.”* (Interviewee 7, YOT-education link worker in Portsmouth)

This quote clearly indicates that this professional believed that the services available for young people at risk, what Bronfenbrenner would define as an exosystem (See Chapter 1 Figure 3), do affect the level of serious or persistent absence from school in a society. Finally, the admissions, exclusions and reintegration manager (interviewee 8) argued that there is a vital role of the state with regard to data. When data are collected and reported back to schools, this means that schools

get an indication of their performance and can compare themselves to other schools, which might lead to schools improving their ways of dealing with (serious or persistent) absentees.

### **7.2.3 Serious or persistent absence from school and offending behaviour**

The existence of a link between serious absence from school and offending behaviour was not contested by the professionals in both countries. Only the YOT practice leader in Portsmouth (interviewee 10) was not sure whether or not there is a relation between persistent absence from school and offending behaviour. The others were unanimous that although there is a clear connection, there is no causal relationship in which the one always (or at least more often) precedes the other:

*“I would imagine it is a bit of fifty/fifty. If the school problem is already there, that could quite easily lead to offending behaviour. If the offending behaviour is already there, that’s probably come from not having pro-social boundaries and that thought pattern already there, and therefore school and education isn’t the top priority. So, it can go either way.”*  
(Interviewee 9, YOT case worker in Portsmouth)

Apart from having similar risk factors (which will be discussed next) the main reason, according to the professionals, for the link between absence from school and offending behaviour lies in the time absentees have during the day to perform illegal activities. Interviewee 11 explained this as follows:

*“But clearly if you are not in school, what the hell are you doing all day long? You tend to be out on the street, cause you don’t want to go out if your parent doesn’t want you to come home. And it is pretty obvious that after a while, we all know what the attention span of a 14 year old will be, after 2 hours let’s go and wrack something, let’s do this, let’s do that.”*  
(Interviewee 11, Manager of the School Attendance Team in Portsmouth)

So, most professionals argued that there is a clear link between offending behaviour and absence from school. They acknowledged, however, that not all absentees offend and not all offenders also have attendance problems at school. Therefore, in the next section the differences and similarities between young offenders and serious absentees according to the professionals will be discussed.

#### *Differences and similarities between persistent absentees and young offenders*



While there seems to be a big overlap between persistent absence from school and offending behaviour, there also are serious or persistent absentees who do not offend and young offenders who do attend school regularly in both countries. Professionals seemed to have quite divergent views on whether or not there was a difference between serious or persistent absentees and young offenders.

Some professionals pointed more towards the similarities between young offenders and persistent absentees. The case worker of the RVDK and three English professionals suggested that there is no real difference between offenders and absentees. Their main argument seemed to be that it does not matter whether they 'only' offend, are 'only' absent from school or both, they all are very vulnerable young people with lots of things going on at home and at school. The YOT practice leader (interviewee 10) argued that it might just be the case that some of them do get caught by the police, whereas the illegal behaviour of others might not be picked up on. He then explained this further:

*"What I would say is for young people that do get in trouble with the police and do go through the criminal justice system and for those that don't come to the attention of the police or justice system, for whatever reason to not be going to school, I don't see necessarily any difference, cause they are still children. And the common theme running through all of that is that they are children where something has happened to stop, something has happened to impact on that school experience, which should be a great experience, school is brilliant." (Interviewee 10, YOT practice leader in Portsmouth)*

So, these professionals suggested that all these young people are just as vulnerable and their risk factors are very similar, and they only seem to have expressed their difficulties in different ways.

On the other hand, some professionals, whilst acknowledging some similarities, indicated that there are clear differences between serious or persistent absentees and young offenders. Interviewee 11 described the difference between persistent absentees who do also offend and those who do not:

*"I think PA [persistent absence] can be broke down in two sorts of aspects: Those that don't want to go to school for a reason, whether that be phobia, whatever, crowds, discipline whatever, and those that wilfully don't wanna comply. Those are the ones I would suggest are more likely to come into the criminal justice system than those that for some reason don't want to attend school. They are not wilfully not want to attend, there is a reason they*

*don't want to attend, that can be bullying, illness, anxieties, whatever.”* (interviewee 11, Manager of the School Attendance Team in Portsmouth)

He suggested that the factors causing the absence from school determine the likelihood of that young person also becoming a young offender. Other professionals seemed to agree with him that absentees who also offend usually show more externalising behaviour problems compared to absentees who do not commit any crimes. A Dutch youth probation officer explained this as follows:

*“There are many similarities of course, but what you often see in cases of persistent absentees is that there is something of a psychiatric or psychological nature, it does not have to be very heavy, but that there is really something that is not going well.”* (Interviewee 3, Youth probation officer in Rotterdam)

Furthermore, some professionals in both countries indicated that boys, with or without attendance problems at school, are more likely to offend than girls. The YOT case worker, who works only with offenders, pointed out that those offenders who also show serious absence problems from school are very different from offenders who attend school regularly:

*“Yeah, massively. Their vulnerability and their risk of further offending is higher. So, if I think of my 3 statutory orders now. I have got one that has a job, goes to college on a regular basis, always been at school, this is his first offence at the age of 16, and he in my eyes is very low risk of reoffending. Whereas then I have one who is on his 6<sup>th</sup> order with us, highly vulnerable at home, not going to school, not engaging really with any agency, yeah his vulnerability is a lot higher. And I think quite often if a young person is vulnerable it can happen through dropping out of school, but also it is evident that they can't cope with education, I think, a lot of the time.”* (Interviewee 9, YOT case worker in Portsmouth)

Two of the Dutch professionals (interviewees 2 and 6) argued that absentees generally speaking are more vulnerable than young offenders. Both of them indicated that persistent absentees usually have more problems at home; the situation at home seems to be more complicated. The youth probation officer (interviewee 2) also indicated that since parents are responsible for the child to attend school, the problems at home are more emphasised in cases of serious or persistent absence from school compared to cases of offenders.

Finally, two of the professionals referred to the seriousness of the crime when discussing whether or not offenders and absentees are different. The case investigator of the RVDK pointed

out (interviewee 1) that unless it is about a very minor crime, young offenders (who commit very serious crimes) are just as vulnerable as persistent absentees. The case coordinator of the RVDK (interviewee 6), argued that when serious or persistent absentees commit crimes, it often are very minor crimes. She considered these crimes to be:

“help-help-offences, yes they do commit those occasionally. Then it really is signal-behaviour.” (Interviewee 6, Case Coordinator at the RVDK in Rotterdam)

So when a persistent absentee commits a light offence, this is because the young person is basically asking for attention, help and support. It is to flag that something is not going well.

Although there was a variety in the extent to which professionals saw differences and similarities between offenders and absentees, most of them agreed that there definitely is some overlap. Interviewee 9 answered as follows when she was asked whether she believed there to be a difference between serious absentees who do not offend and those who do:

“I think there has got to be, because otherwise they would be offending as well or the others wouldn’t be offending. And I don’t know what that is if I am honest. I don’t know and I suppose that is why I am still in a job, I don’t think we know what it is that makes some young people offend and others not.” (Interviewee 9, YOT case worker in Portsmouth)

This indicates that even among professionals working with young offenders and serious or persistent absentees there is still uncertainty about which factors and circumstances are determining the life course of a person.

#### **7.2.4 Key findings**

One of the aims of this research project was to establish the characteristics of serious or persistent absentees in both countries and to explore the influence of the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour. This section on how professionals in each country defined the problem is helpful because it gives insight in how, according to the professionals, serious or persistent absence from school manifests itself in each of the countries. Whilst there seemed to be many similarities in what professionals believed to be causing serious or persistent absence from school (i.e. family factors, school factors, peers etc.), the thematic analysis also uncovered some differences between the Dutch and English professionals. A key difference is that English professionals suggested more than the Dutch professionals that persistent absence from school can be the result of a lack of value of education that goes from generation to generation. This could, therefore, be a bigger impact on

absence from school in England than in the Netherlands. This also points towards a cultural difference between England and the Netherlands which might affect which groups of people are more likely to become serious or persistent absentees.

With regards to the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour, professionals in both countries agreed that there is an association between these concepts and serious or persistent absence from school. Professionals used different definitions to describe the vulnerability of serious or persistent absentees, but there was not a clear difference in this respect between English and Dutch professionals. Professionals in both countries suggested there is a connection between serious or persistent absence from school and offending behaviour. Some professionals suggested an impact of the offending behaviour on the characteristics of the serious or persistent absentees. Only Dutch professionals discussed the impact of the severity of the crimes committed on serious or persistent absentees. Some of the professionals seemed to suggest that the offending behaviour actually influences the level of vulnerability of the serious or persistent absentees. So, this section has highlighted that there is much overlap in how Dutch and English professionals define serious or persistent absence from school (and what they view as contributing factors) and that professionals do believe the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour seem to impact on serious or persistent absentees. However, most professionals are not exactly sure in which ways the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour affect serious or persistent absence from school in both countries. Because it is unclear who or what exactly is causing serious or persistent absence from school, and because this might differ on a case-to-case basis, it is difficult to decide who should be held responsible and how the problem should be responded to. The next section will discuss the views that professionals in both countries take on this question.

### **7.3 Responding to persistent absence**

In each country, policies on how to deal with serious or persistent absence from school have changed over the years, and most professionals have experienced different ways of responding to serious or persistent absence from school. Since levels of persistent absence from school are still high in both countries, these policies have thus far not been successful in solving the problem of serious or persistent absence from school. This section will address what professionals themselves considered to be the most effective way to tackle serious or persistent absence from school, who they believed should be the focus of the response and whether the approach should be more punitive or care oriented. This section will start, however, with who, according to the professionals, is responsible for serious or persistent absence from school.

### 7.3.1 Responsibility

When comparing the Dutch and English laws on serious or persistent absence from school, it becomes clear that in England solely parents can be held responsible compared to a mix of the parents and the persistent absentee in the Netherlands (See Chapter 3). In the interviews, however, professionals within and across both countries had diverse views about who could and should be held responsible for the serious or persistent absence of the young person.

Where the law focuses either on parents or young people (or both), some professionals believed that schools in some cases are also responsible for the serious or persistent absence from school. A Dutch youth probation officer (interviewee 2) argued that schools are culpable when they fail to contact parents when a child is not attending. The YOT case worker argued the following about the responsibility of schools when dealing with young people with learning difficulties who are at risk of becoming persistent absentees:

*“Although, in the YOT a lot of our caseload will have issues with education. In a school setting I understand that those figures are normally flipped on their head. So 80% of our caseload within the YOT will have some sort of speech language, communication, need difficulty, whereas in schools it is perhaps 80% without that and 20% with. And that 20% do get lost and missed, I would say and I think the schools could do a lot more to try and keep them in.”* (Interviewee 9, YOT case worker in Portsmouth)

The manager of the school attendance team, however, clearly disagreed that schools are responsible for serious or persistent absence:

*“So, is it schools responsibility? I think it is schools’ responsibility to educate the child and make the child feel safe when they are in school, make them feel welcome, make them feel valued. I don’t think it is school’s role to sort out chaotic lifestyles and I don’t think it is school’s role to try and interfere into that chaotic lifestyle. Because we have many others that can who fail, and I suppose it would be a massive drain on their resources to deal with chaotic families.”* (Interviewee 11, Manager of the School Attendance Team in Portsmouth)

So the professionals who were interviewed were not all in agreement about whether or not schools have a responsibility in preventing or dealing with serious or persistent absence from school. But it is interesting, that some of them did consider the role of the school whilst schools are not legally responsible in both countries.

Almost all professionals believed that parents should be held responsible for the persistent absence of their child, because in the end it is their responsibility to ensure that their child gets educated. Interviewee 11 (School attendance team manager) worded this as follows:

*“I think it is very difficult, the parents that we deal with need to be reminded that they are responsible, responsible for their children. It needs to be reaffirmed to them that they chose to have the children, they cannot allow their children to be ferule, out on the streets doing what they want, there is a sense of responsibility.”* (Interviewee 11, Manager of the School Attendance Team in Portsmouth)

The professionals differed, however, in their views about whether or not exemptions should be made for parents in certain situations. Some Dutch professionals (interviewees 1 and 6) specified that especially those parents who refuse to cooperate with the care and support they are offered should be held responsible. Furthermore, two other Dutch professionals (Interviewees 4 and 5) argued that parents would have to show they did everything in their power to get their child to attend regularly in order to be excused from being held responsible.

Many professionals considered the age of the persistent absentee to be a defining factor in the extent to which both parents and the young person themselves are responsible for the absence from school (interviewees 1, 3, 4, 9 and 11). Where all of these professionals agreed that age need to be considered, they had very different views about the age at which responsibility shifts from parents to child. Most of the Dutch professionals suggested that for children between the age of 12 and 16 there should be a shared responsibility, and for older children only the absentee should be held responsible. A youth probation officer justified this cut-off age of 16 as follows:

*I believe it is good that children from the age of 12 are partly responsible, because you do have your own choices from that age. But I do not believe that a child of 12, 13 or 14 is already a big child who has to do everything alone. So, I also believe it is good that parents at that age still could be addressed. I believe 16 is now the boundary [...] and I believe that is good. At that age there are also other choices ,for example legal choices about your medical file, that you have to make yourself.”* (Interviewee 3, Youth probation officer in Rotterdam)

So, all Dutch professionals, who took age into account when discussing the responsibility-issue, believed that it is right that the Dutch law holds both the parents and the young person responsible from the age of 12 to 16. Many of them said that with children aged 16 and 17 responsibility

definitely shifts more towards the young person, and that although legally parents are still responsible, in practice mainly the young person will get prosecuted in these cases. Some English professionals (interviewee 9 and 11) also argued that when children are in their teenage years they have some form of responsibility, although this is not legally the case in England. Interviewee 11, however, also clearly stated that even at this age there are limits to the responsibility of the child:

*“Yes, I think there is a certain degree that a child has to take responsibility, but they are children. Even at 14 and 15, they are still children, they may think they are adult and grown-up, but they are not, they haven’t got a clue. And they can’t take responsibility for themselves, because they can’t make rational decisions.”* (Interviewee 11, Manager of the School Attendance Team in Portsmouth)

So, this English professional also seemed to defend that by English law only parents can be held responsible for the school attendance of their children.

Most professionals who discussed the responsibility of the child argued that the child is mainly responsible when they are wilfully not attending school. A Dutch education welfare officer explained how she decides whether to prosecute the young person, the parents or both:

*“It is all about who we believe is culpable for the persistent absence. When you have a young person who says every morning “get lost” and I will do what I fancy anyway, well then it is clear. But if you have a parent who keeps the child at home, yeah you cannot expect the child to go against the parent.”* (Interviewee 5, Education welfare officer in Rotterdam)

A Dutch youth probation officer (interviewee 3) also believed that when a young person is not attending school because of a lack of motivation and puberty behaviour it is fair to punish the child. However, when there are psychiatric problems, such as anxiety, causing the non-attendance that should be dealt with differently. The next section will discuss different ideas on how to respond to serious or persistent absence from school.

### **7.3.2 Ideal response**

All professionals were asked what they believed to be the most effective way of responding to serious or persistent absence from school if they did not have to take into account any rules, costs or the law. Interestingly, many of the professionals in both countries emphasised the young person in their solutions to the problem. Furthermore, on the continuum of welfare versus punishment, almost all professionals thought that the most effective response would be to support the young

person and (according to some professionals) the family. So, many professionals believed the focus should be on helping rather than punishing the absentee or the parents.

Almost all of the Dutch professionals mentioned that the focus should be much more on prevention. They argued that by signalling the problems at an early stage and then dealing with them, many cases of serious or persistent absence from school could be prevented. The case investigator of the RVDK argued that schools could play an important role in this respect:

*“Well, it is of course for the best if it could be prevented, because this is of course a very cumbersome way. It actually is already too far gone when there is serious absence from school; it is very hard to turn the tide. I think that schools are the first place where you have to look for prevention, of course also the family, but we cannot apply prevention there straight away. So the schools, maybe also the primary schools, paying more attention to which children are often late or are often absent because parents report them being sick.”*

(Interviewee 1, Case investigator at the RVDK in Rotterdam)

Some of the other Dutch professionals concurred that schools could play an important role in the early identification of the problem, but they also argued that it is vital to then offer that young person the right support. Many English professionals also suggested that a very individualised approach, which identifies the specific problems of a young person to then put the right support in place to address those problems would be very good. The YOT practice leader discussed the availability of support for young people:

*“It can be difficult to match what is available to a young person’s needs at that point in time. And when I think about courses or opportunities that come and go, depending on a whole set of circumstances, sometimes a young person can have an opportunity and they will embrace the opportunity and learn from it and move forward. Other times they may not want that opportunity or they may not be ready for it, but then when they are ready for it, it is not available.”* (Interviewee 10, YOT practice leader in Portsmouth)

And many professionals in both countries agreed that there often is a lack of available provision and support for the young person and the family, and that once the support is available the problem often has already progressed too much and thereby has become too big. The case coordinator of the RVDK described this as follows:



*“That there is the space, time and money to say what is going on with you, what would you need and what would your family need to prevent this from progressing. [...] And that there are places for care and the treatment which children need. Because now we often see that it is clear what they need, but that it is not there or not available. [...] Sure, that you think this young person should go to a group [guided living], but the waiting time is a year. Well that young person will not pull through during that year, and then you just know that he will end up with a closed care placement, because we cannot provide what he needs during that time.”* (Interviewee 6, Case coordinator of the RVDK in Rotterdam)

Many of the English professionals also underlined that developing relationships is a crucial factor in responding to young people at risk of becoming a serious or persistent absentee. The YOT practice leader described this as follows:

*“The bit for me around working with young people is getting that engagement. No matter what you do, if you are actually able to engage with the young person, you will secure some positive outcome. It may take you time, it may take some time to actually get there, but if you could build, if you could establish, maintain and develop a working relationship you go a long long way and the child will potentially go even further”* (Interviewee 10, YOT practice leader in Portsmouth)

These young people, according to the professionals, require intensive mentoring or a positive role model to give them the extra attention they need. In this respect, some professionals in both countries argued that young people who struggle at school and therefore might be at risk of becoming a serious or persistent absentee will benefit from smaller classes. So, more places in special provisions, such as pupil referral units, should be arranged.

Some Dutch and some English professionals emphasised that an effective response to serious or persistent absence from school should always be a multi-system approach. Because a focus on solely the individual will not work if you do not take away the problems this young person is experiencing in the family and/or at school. The YOT case worker described how school, family and the young person should be seen as a triangle:

*“It has got to be a three-party approach: Family, young person and school. And then there could be people within that. But broadly if you deal with all 3 fronts at the one time, you run a much greater probability of a positive outcome. If you try and deal with it in isolation, I think it is doomed to failure. If it is just the school challenging the young person, without the*

*support and backing of the family, then you probably won't get anywhere. If it is a family and a school working together for the young person to be a part of that, you are more likely to get a positive outcome."* (Interviewee 9, YOT case worker in Portsmouth)

So, the dominant view among the professionals is that case-specific (focusing on the specific problems of that young person) support should be offered and all microsystems (See Chapter 1 Figure 3 for Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory) that seem to have an influence on the young person should be addressed in the approach. Many professionals, therefore, suggested that an holistic approach in line with Daviter's solving strategy would be most effective to address serious or persistent absence from school (Daviter, 2017, See Chapter 1). However, many also indicated that a strong focus on early detection might prevent the problem from becoming so complex that an holistic approach is necessary.

One of the English professionals (interviewee 11) was very sceptical about finding an effective way of responding to serious or persistent absence from school. He said it is very difficult because the mindset the young person and the family have about education should be changed, but it is very hard to achieve that. This professional, therefore, did not believe that even a holistic strategy would solve the problem, which is in line with the view of many researchers on complex and wicked problems (Daviter, 2017). Furthermore he argued that a much tougher approach towards the parents is needed. So he leaned far more towards a punitive approach than the other professionals in England and the Dutch professionals. However, some of the Dutch professionals did argue that at some point, if nothing else works, there should be consequences for the actions and therefore going down the route of punishment would then be an option. The next sections will focus more specifically on whether professionals believed punishing parents or children for the serious absence from school is a good idea and if so what would be a suitable punishment.

### **7.3.3 Response to the parents**

Almost all professionals in both countries felt that it is good to have the option to prosecute parents for the serious or persistent absence of their child. However, many of them did argue that it should be used only as a last resort when the offered support did not solve the problem:

*"I think we have to have that sort of end game. Because you know when we are working with anyone - children, adults whatever – if you don't have some boundary that says that is the bottom line and an enforceable bottom line, then how do you try and sort of get to here."* (Interviewee 8, Admissions, Exclusions and Reintegration manager in Portsmouth)

Especially in the Netherlands, some professionals argued that parents should only be prosecuted when there was proof that they had not done everything in their power to get the child to attend school. So these professionals viewed prosecution as unnecessary when parents accepted help or when it was clear that the young person was just refusing to go to school. So, as a Dutch youth probation officer argued, the decision whether or not to prosecute has to be made on a case-to-case basis:

*"I find it varies per case. It is dependent on what parents do to get it to work. I have parents who cooperate really well, want to do anything, but it still does not work. I think that is a completely different situation than a parent who just stays in bed and therefore the child will not go to school. Yes, then I do believe the parent should be held responsible."*  
(Interviewee 2, Youth probation officer in Rotterdam)

Many professionals agreed that when parents do not seem to care, actively avoid offered support or willingly keep their children at home (for example to go on a holiday outside term time) they should be held responsible and prosecuted. Some professionals, on the other hand, did not make this distinction and argued that parents are still responsible for their child and therefore should get prosecuted when the young person is a serious or persistent absentee, even if they tried everything in their power to get the child to attend school.

So, almost all professionals believed that it should be possible to punish or prosecute the parents. When asked what would be an appropriate punishment, the answers were more divergent. First of all, some English professionals were questioning whether prosecuting or any form of punishment would solve the problem. The YOT-education link worker (interviewee 7) addressed this as follows:

*"How much that affects the actual attendance and the outcomes for the young person in the end of the day though, is debatable. [...] I think it depends on the severity of what they are doing. I think if a young offender is that far away, is a prolific offender, I don't think they care if their parent get a fine. Sometimes, I don't think the parents care if they get a fine."*  
(Interviewee 7, YOT-education link worker in Portsmouth)

Some other English professionals concurred that it probably would not work, but that the option to prosecute was still important, because as interviewee 8 explained it might work as a deterrent:

*“That is difficult isn’t it. Because actually the ones that it is gonna have any effect with, it’s probably already had effect in saying we are going to prosecute you, they have probably already done something about it. The ones that get to court and that, actually are so entrenched that what do you do? But I think ultimately you have to have it being able to escalate to the more aggravated offences and ultimately you know imprisonment. [...] But is it putting the right people there, is it putting the people there that it is gonna have an effect on, no, it is a bit more sort of like let’s show that this is we can do, because then these people who were just on the fringes up here will see oh you can actually go to prison and people have gone to prison, ok well maybe I’ll.... So, it is perhaps the positive effect on other people rather than the positive effect on the person that goes to prison.”* (Interviewee 8, Admissions, Exclusions and Reintegration manager in Portsmouth)

Some Dutch professionals did question whether imprisonment would solve the problem as well. The manager of the school attendance team in Portsmouth, on the other hand, was the only professional who indicated that prosecuting parents is a good thing, not only because it is needed as a last resort, but because it actually works:

*“I think the fundamental problem is that people seem to think you take someone to court they are gonna go from 50% attendance to attending every day for the rest of their lives. Sorry, it doesn’t work that way. It is about modifying behaviour, getting them back into school and allowing the child to see what worth education is to them. All our indications year in year out shows that attendance is always better 20 weeks after court than 20 weeks before.”* (Interviewee 11, Manager of the School Attendance Team in Portsmouth)

So, he believed that whilst it might not solve the problem completely, it certainly reduces the absence from school.

Professionals mentioned several possible appropriate sentences for the parents of serious or persistent absentees. First of all, some professionals argued that the most appropriate punishment should also be decided on a case-to-case basis, because as several professionals indicated it does not seem to make much sense to punish parents who already have financial problems with a fine. Some sort of community service was seen as an appropriate replacement for a fine. Furthermore, quite a few professionals argued that it is better to give a conditional sentence, so that parents still get the chance to improve the attendance of their child, which is the ultimate goal of the prosecution. Finally, some professionals argued that the route of prosecution could be

used to force parents to cooperate with support. In line with this, some Dutch professionals discussed the option of punishing parents with a compulsory parenting course.

#### **7.3.4 Response to the serious or persistent absentee**

The majority of the professionals in both countries believed that it is often not good to criminalise young people, and therefore it is better to offer the serious or persistent absentees support than to punish them. The YOT-education link worker was clearly very against punishing serious absentees:

*“Punishment, no, punishment doesn’t work. You see, if a young person is not going to school there is good reasons why they are not going. [...] You know, how can you punish that young person? What would work? I think you can make them aware of it, put support into place, so they realise the importance of it, it is important to do so.”* (Interviewee 7, YOT-education link worker in Portsmouth).

Another English professional argued that young people should not be prosecuted, because it is still the parents who are responsible. The project worker at Barnardo’s believed that rather than punishing the young person, an incentive should be given to them to attend:

*“So, I think there needs to be something for the young person, their needs to be an incentive for them to attend. So, you know I don’t think they should be punished, but they should be encouraged to engage more in school. So is there like an after school-club, is there something they really enjoy. What do they have to do to get that praise at school. What do they have to do to get you know something fun, so there should be an incentive, they should want to come to school.”* (Interviewee 12, Project worker at Barnardo’s in Portsmouth)

Some Dutch professionals suggested that the young person should be offered help and support first, but when the young person refuses this support or when the absence from school continues, the young person should still be prosecuted. Others said that it should depend on the reasons for the absence from school; a punishment is good when a young person is not attending because of a lack of motivation or puberty, but when a young person really wants to attend school but fails to do so due to anxiety or family circumstances they should not be prosecuted.

So, not all professionals believed prosecuting the young person would be the most effective response. In addition, many of the professionals who did believe in prosecution in specific cases often argued that it should be used to get the appropriate (compulsory) support in place. The YOT

practice leader indicated that there should be an order for serious or persistent absentees, because this will create recourses to offer the specific support that is needed:

*“that if a young person was a persistent absentee from school and there was the opportunity to have that blank bit of paper to allocate resources, that young person could have an allocated worker for the duration of the order to make sure that that young person’s situation was turned around. It might not mean that they go to school, but it might mean that there is a provision put in place and by putting that provision in place to help and support, it might see longer term benefits and outcomes which results in better outcomes elsewhere. It is very grand, it is very idealistic. Whether it happens in 2015 in England? Probably not because there is no money.”* (Interviewee 10, YOT practice leader in Portsmouth)

Other possible punishments discussed by the professionals are a community service sentence or a sentence which secures education. In this idea the young person would have to wear a tag which ensures that the young person is at the school building during the school hours. These two punishments definitely have a more punitive character than the other suggestions which focused on getting the right care and support in place for the absentee.

Finally, some professionals argued that there should be more space for young people (aged 15, 16 and 17) to work instead of attending school. According to these professionals education is just not suitable for some young people and the government seems to be creating a problem by not allowing them to work instead.

*“I do actually believe that we have to become more lenient in these cases. Because what is wrong with, generations back people also started to work when they were 16 and these turned out to be fine people. There is not necessarily a criminal side to that, or that people do not reach a certain level and therefore live a less fulfilling life. So, I believe that we should look far more at the individual and that it should be possible to make an exception to the rule in those cases.”* (Interviewee 4, Education welfare officer in Rotterdam)

Where quite a few Dutch and English professionals shared this opinion, there were also two Dutch professionals who were really against making exceptions to the law. They argued that qualifications have become more and more important in today’s society, and therefore children of compulsory education age should not be allowed to work instead.

In conclusion, according to the majority of the professionals, in order to be effective a response to serious or persistent absence from school should emphasise care and support far more than punishment. This was the dominant view among both Dutch and English professionals. They were also in agreement that it is good that the law (in both countries) offers the possibility to prosecute the parents of serious or persistent absentees. Views about appropriate punishments were more divergent. Finally, some English professionals argued against prosecuting the absentees themselves, where the dominant view amongst the Dutch professionals was that if there are clear indicators that the young person is responsible, it is good to have the option to prosecute. But even then, the ultimate goal in the eye of the professionals is to get the right support into place for the young person and the family, which would hopefully result in improved attendance.

### **7.3.5 Key findings**

The second aim of the research project was to identify differences and similarities in the response to serious or persistent absence from school in both countries, and to identify whether policy transfer could be possible. This section indicates that professionals in both countries believe that due to the complexity, it is very difficult to find an effective response to serious or persistent absence from school. Most professionals in both countries suggested that responses should focus more on prevention and on supporting the young person and the family. Yet, professionals did differ in the extent to which they believed the option of prosecuting the young person should be available. The majority of the Dutch professionals believed that having the option to prosecute a young person is good in order to get them to engage with the offered support. Some English professionals, on the other hand, were clearly against the idea of prosecuting serious or persistent absentees, because this would only criminalise these young people. Most interviewees were very interested to hear about the response in the other country, but the analysis of the interviews did not put forward a measure of which professionals (in one of the countries) thought it could be suitable for policy transfer.

## **7.4 Conclusion**

This chapter showed that professional views on the causes of and serious or persistent absence from school are very similar to the causes identified in existing research evidence (See Chapter 2). This suggests that the interviewed professionals were well informed. When asked about the causes of serious or persistent absence from school, all professionals initially focussed on the causes directly impacting on the serious or persistent absence from school. So, most of the causes mentioned were situated within the inner circles of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3) which represent factors related to the individual and different microsystems. Probably, these causes were emphasised by professionals, because it is these factors

that professionals can more easily change when working with serious or persistent absentees and their families. It is much harder for professionals to influence factors situated in the outer circles of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (macrosystems and exosystems), such as culture or factors at the state level.

One of the aims of this research project was to establish differences and similarities in characteristics of serious or persistent absentees in England and the Netherlands. The interviews with the professionals have given insight into the similarities and differences between how serious or persistent absence from school is viewed by the professionals. Whilst there were many similarities in the views of which factors contribute to serious or persistent absence from school, there were also four key differences: Firstly, at the individual level Dutch professionals referred more often to internalising problems, whereas English professionals frequently pointed towards externalising problems. Secondly, only Dutch professionals indicated that many of the serious or persistent absentees have low cognitive skills. They linked this to serious or persistent absence from school due to weak school achievements and due to being more easily influenced by peers who were either offending or skipping school. Thirdly, English professionals spoke more often about families of serious or persistent absentees who do not value education as a contributing factor to serious or persistent absence from school. Finally, whilst both English and Dutch professionals discussed financial problems within families, only English professionals connected this to living in a deprived neighbourhood. Professionals in both countries addressed risk factors at almost all levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The above key differences, however, indicate that Dutch professionals seem to stress the impact of individual factors and how these influence other environments of the young person more than English professionals. English professionals, on the other hand, placed more emphasis on the family microsystem and then explained how this impacted on other microsystems.

The majority of professionals did argue that it is good that the possibility of punishing the parents exists. Some Dutch professionals suggested, however, that parents should only be held responsible when they refuse to cooperate with the care and support that is being offered. It was also mainly Dutch professionals who held the view that once a young person was 16 years or older, responsibility should shift from a shared responsibility of both parents and the absentee, to only the young person becoming responsible. This is in contrast with the Dutch law, in which parents can be held responsible as well as the young person until the young person turns 18. Only some of the English professionals, on the other hand, had reservations about punishing the serious or persistent absentees themselves. It seems, therefore, that professionals are used to the way things are organised in their country, and therefore English professionals find it difficult to find positives



in punishing the young person, and Dutch professionals would only punish parents if it is clear that they are (at least) partly to blame for the serious or persistent absence from school.

All professionals, both the Dutch and the English, believed that a response to persistent absence should focus more on welfare than on punishment. Many professionals, for example, indicated that punishment should only be used as a last resort and support should be offered first (for both parents and the young person). Another suggestion was that instead of punishing the young person, more incentives to attend school should be created. Some of the English professionals were very sceptical about the effectiveness of any form of punishment or prosecution. Mainly Dutch professionals argued for more emphasis on prevention, because many cases of serious or persistent absence from school could be prevented when attendance problems are detected and dealt with at an early stage. A focus on prevention, therefore, would mean that the problem will not progress to become a complex and wicked problem that is hard to solve. Finally, mainly English professionals discussed the possibility of punishment and imprisonment of parents in light of the deterrent effect it might have on others, and therefore contended that whilst it might not have an effect in the specific case it might prevent other cases of serious or persistent absence from school.

The second aim of this research project was to consider the possibility of policy transfer between the two countries. Professionals within the same country had different views on what the best response to serious or persistent absence from school would be. There certainly was not a unanimous view that the response in the other country would be good to implement. Many English professionals did, however indicate that they liked the term 'signal absence' that is used in the Netherlands, because it accurately describes that for many serious or persistent absentees the absence is a sign that there are underlying problems. One professional even suggested that they should adopt the use of that term in England. Therefore, according to the professionals the only possible option for transfer from the Netherlands to England would be to introduce the term 'signal absence'.

## Chapter 8 Discussion and Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

*‘Compulsory education and school non-attendance constitute two faces of the same coin: it would be inconceivable to imagine otherwise where education for all is required by law’* (Carlen, Gleeson and Wardhaugh, 1992, p. 12)

This quote, which was first introduced in Chapter 1, argues that it is impossible to imagine solving the problem of absence from school altogether. The literature on complexity theory and wicked problems would also lead to the conclusion that solving (as in eliminating) a complex and wicked problem such as serious or persistent absence from school is unlikely (Daviter, 2017; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Carlen et al. (1992) merely state the viewpoint that as soon as something is compulsory, there will always be people who disobey. The literature on wicked problems, on the other hand, suggests that it is the complex interplay of different factors involved in a problem that creates the difficulty in solving it (Daviter, 2017; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Although some research points towards the impossibility of solving the problem of serious or persistent absence from school altogether, both the Dutch and the English governments still aspire to do so.

Chapter 3 has shown that both Dutch and English policy in recent years have extended and added a qualification requirement to the age of compulsory education. Many of the serious or persistent absentees in this research project, however, struggled to attend school regularly and to obtain a ‘start qualification’ (See Chapter 5). Therefore, extending the age of compulsory education might not be a good solution. This research project has investigated the scope and nature of serious or persistent absence from school in England and the Netherlands. In addition, the different strategies (focusing only on the parents (England) or on both the parents and the serious or persistent absentees (the Netherlands)) used in both countries to respond to serious or persistent absence from school were compared. This means that the results of this research project can contribute to the debate about what is causing serious or persistent absence from school (in different countries), and how best to respond to serious or persistent absentees and/or their parents. The main aims of this research project were:

**Aim 1:** To investigate serious or persistent absence from school in England and the Netherlands - specifically the characteristics of the serious or persistent absentees, the influence of the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour and the policies and practice in each country.

**Aim 2:** To identify similarities and differences between England and the Netherlands in responding to serious or persistent absence from school and to consider the transferability of responses between the two countries.

Six objectives were set in order to achieve these aims (See Chapter 1). The overall aims illustrate that the emphasis of this project was on the comparison between England and the Netherlands. Although studying a complex problem like serious or persistent absence from school comparatively brings along challenges, the research project has certainly led to some interesting findings. This chapter will first present the key findings of this study in relation to the overall aims and specific objectives, and place them in the context of existing research evidence. Secondly, it will discuss the contributions to knowledge of the research; i.e. whether or not there seems to be an influence of macrolevel factors in England and the Netherlands on the nature of serious or persistent absence from school, the impact of the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour on serious or persistent absence from school, and the successes and failures of the overall approach taken by the local authority in response to serious or persistent absence from school in both countries. Finally, the implications for policy and practice will be considered and recommendations for future research in relation to serious or persistent absence from school will be made.

## **8.2 Background and characteristics of serious or persistent absentees**

### **8.2.1 England compared with the Netherlands**

The results of the case file analysis of this project into the risk factors present among serious or persistent absentees in England and the Netherlands adds to a small body of comparative research on the topic. Serious or persistent absentees in both countries experience similar problems at the individual level and within the microsystems of school, family, peers and neighbourhood to the ones that were already established in large literature review studies by Lauchlan (2003) and Kearny (2008a;2008b). Furthermore, all risk factors mentioned in Table 2 in Chapter 2, which are based on existing research evidence, are present among at least some of the serious or persistent absentees in the samples for this research project. The main risk factors that could be established were at the individual and microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1, Figure 3): At the individual level, serious or persistent absentees suffered from mental health problems, behaviour problems, sleep problems, and substance misuse. At the family level single-parent families, financial problems, emotional or physical abuse and poor relationships were risk factors present among the serious or persistent absentees in the samples of this research project. At the school level, absentees often had a weak school performance, bad relationships with teachers and/or were not attending the right school for them. Some serious or persistent absentees

had peers who were also skipping school or offending whilst others were experiencing a lack of friends and feeling isolated. This study corroborates findings from previous research that many serious or persistent absentees have to deal with an accumulation of risk factors at the different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system and the adversities often start at a very young age (Van der Laan et al., 2009).

Kearny (2008a) indicates that results from studies into serious or persistent absence from school are very similar across the western world. However, the literature review did not uncover any studies into serious or persistent absence from school that compare policy, practice and original case file data on absentees from two countries. Yet, on the basis of Kearny's (2008a) review one would expect the characteristics of serious or persistent absentees in England and the Netherlands to be very much alike. Risk factors for serious or persistent absence from school can exist at every level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1, Figure 3), and can range, therefore, from factors very close to the absentee (at the individual level or in the different microsystems) to factors much further away from the absentee (at the exosystem or macrosystem level). The results of this research indicate that although there are many similarities between the absentees in the two countries especially with regards to different types of risk factors that are present, there is a substantial difference in which risk factors are most commonly recorded in the case files of the serious or persistent absentees in each of the two countries.

At the individual level, Dutch serious or persistent absentees are more likely to be assessed as experiencing sleep problems, physical health problems and behaviour disorders, whilst the English absentees seem to display more mental health problems and drugs misuse. The significant difference between the use of soft drugs of serious or persistent absentees in the two countries is very interesting, since there is almost no difference in the use of cannabis among 15-year olds in England and the Netherlands according to the WHO (2016) (See Chapter 3, Table 8 ). This suggests that different groups might be more likely to become serious or persistent absentee in England than in the Netherlands. Van der Laan et al. (2009) already established that persistent absentees in the Netherlands have fewer substance misuse problems compared to other Dutch juvenile offenders, whilst they experience more problems in all other areas. This suggests a real difference between Dutch young offenders and persistent absentees in the use of substances, rather than a difference in recording or emphasis of the professionals. The use of (soft) drugs is also part of the assessment instrument that was used in the Netherlands, which indicates that Dutch professionals would certainly record substance misuse in the case files. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that, the use of (soft) drugs is a strong risk factor for serious or persistent absence from school in England, and less so in the Netherlands.

At the family level, English serious or persistent absentees are assessed as having more risk factors than Dutch serious or persistent absentees. Apart from having separated parents and having parents with physical health problems, all risk factors at the family level are more present among the English serious or persistent absentees. This is not to say that Dutch absentees do not experience many problems within the family, but some risk factors clearly have a very high prevalence among English absentees. For example, 45 percent of the English serious or persistent absentees have witnessed or been a victim of domestic violence, 47.3 percent live in a family with financial problems and 61.8 percent moved home/living situation frequently. In addition, 30.5 percent of the English serious or persistent absentees have one or more parents with substance abuse problems, compared to only 9.8 percent of the Dutch absentees. This might be an additional explanation for the large difference in drug use between English and Dutch serious or persistent absentees.

At the school level, there are fewer differences between the two countries in the prevalence of most risk factors than at the family level. However, more English serious or persistent absentees would rather attend a different school (68.7% compared to 54.7%) and more Dutch absentees report a lack of friends at school (32.9% compared to 24.4%), and have a weak school performance (57.8% compared to 49.6%). Yet, a more noticeable difference between the two countries seems to be within the school-family mesosystem. A much higher proportion of parents of Dutch serious or persistent absentees/Dutch schools complain about the communication with the school/parents respectively (45.8% compared to 9.9%). So, there are also differences in the prevalence of some risk factors within the school microsystem and the school-family mesosystem. Finally, within the peers microsystem there is a significant association between English and Dutch serious or persistent absentees and time spent outside the house with friends, having friends that were said to be not orientated towards academic achievement and/or friends who had been involved with the police. These peer-related factors are more prevalent among English serious or persistent absentees compared to Dutch serious or persistent absentees.

### **8.2.2 The impact of the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour**

The large prevalence of many of the established risk factors across the sample in both England and the Netherlands indicates that almost all serious or persistent absentees are vulnerable to some extent. Even, as one of the professionals in Chapter 7 suggests, the serious or persistent absence in itself makes them vulnerable. However, the level of vulnerability is different for serious or persistent absentees within the same and between the two countries. The same is true for offending behaviour. Whilst there are many serious or persistent absentees who also commit some

crimes, there are others who do not display delinquent behaviour at all. And even among those who have committed at least one offence, there is a difference both in the number and the severity of the crimes they have committed. Generally, Dutch serious or persistent absentees have committed fewer recorded crimes and the crimes are less severe compared to the English serious or persistent absentees.

The differences between the four groups based on the intersecting vulnerability and offending behaviour continua give an insight into the influence of the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour on the background and characteristics of serious or persistent absentees, which might be helpful in finding an effective response. Much of the variation in risk factors between the four groups in both countries is what one would expect based on the classification of the groups. It does not come as a surprise that the *primarily offending* group displays many externalising behaviour problems, the *primarily vulnerable* group experiences many problems within the family microsystem, and the *high vulnerability/high offending* group is subjected to an accumulation of risk factors across all microsystems and at the individual level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3). However, the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group would also be expected to have the lowest prevalence of risk factors in most areas. And although this is true for the English *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* serious or persistent absentees, in the Netherlands many risk factors are less prevalent among the *primarily offending* group. This suggests that there are differences between the two countries in the way young people are assessed and/or in the nature of the risks they are exposed to in the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* and the *primarily offending* groups in this research.

Van der Laan et al. (2009) indicate that Dutch serious or persistent absentees experience more risk factors in all areas compared to Dutch juvenile offenders apart from substance misuse. This project seems to corroborate their finding that Dutch young people who are only serious or persistent absentees from school (and not also young offenders) have more risk factors than those who are classed as juvenile offenders. This is not the case in England where the *primarily offending behaviour* group actually seemed to experience more problems than the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group. Moffitt (1993) distinguishes between 'adolescence-limited' and 'life-course persistent' antisocial behaviour. Causes for 'adolescence-limited' antisocial behaviour are proximal and related to the development from child to adolescent, whereas life-course persistent antisocial behaviour is caused by troubles starting in the early childhood (Moffitt, 1993). It is possible, therefore, that the behaviour of some young people in the *Dutch primarily offending* group is adolescence-limited. Their offending behaviour and serious or persistent absence from school could be merely age-related and they, therefore, might experience fewer risk factors within some of the microsystems (such as the family). For some of the Dutch absentees in the *low*

*vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group, on the other hand, the absence from school might be real 'signal absence' (the term used in the Netherlands, See Chapter 1 Figure 1). This means that their serious or persistent absence from school is basically a sign that things are not going well in different areas of their life. Yet, the question remains, why this only seems to be the case in the Netherlands and not in England. It might be partly explained by the difference in number and severity of the crimes the young people in the *primarily offending* group in England committed compared to those in the Netherlands, but it is also possible that different processes underlying serious or persistent absence from school account for this distinction between the two countries. This section has clearly shown that the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour do seem to impact on the background and characteristics of serious or persistent absentees in both countries. The next section will look into the impact of possible processes underlying serious or persistent absence from school in each of the countries.

### **8.3 Processes underlying serious or persistent absence from school**

#### **8.3.1 The complex interplay between risk factors at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory**

The case studies presented in Chapter 6 suggest that the interaction between factors within the same and between different microsystems (so mesosystems) and the interplay between individual factors and factors within different microsystems (See Bandura's social cognitive theory, Chapter 1 Figure 4) seem to play a crucial part in the onset and progression of serious or persistent absence from school. Absentees in all four groups based on the intersecting vulnerability and offending behaviour continua seem to have variables at different levels interacting with each other, which increases the problem and makes it very complex. However, the *primarily vulnerable* and the *primarily offending* groups of serious or persistent absentees were more homogenous in where the issues started compared to the *low vulnerability/ low offending behaviour* and *high vulnerability/ high offending behaviour* groups.

Problems for most *primarily vulnerable* serious or persistent absentees often start at a very young age and within the family. These family issues frequently create problems at the individual level (mostly internalising problems) as well. The combination of the problems within the family and at the individual level impacts on the functioning of the individual within other microsystems such as at school and in relation to peers. For the *primarily offending behaviour* group, on the other hand, problems mostly start with externalising behaviour which leads to problems at school and within the family. Distinctive for the *low vulnerability/ low offending behaviour* group is the variety between the areas in which they experience most problems and where the problems start.

Conversely, serious or persistent absentees in the *high vulnerability/ high offending behaviour* group have to deal with so many risk factors, that it is often hard to pinpoint in which system the problems started and where they are most severe. So, there is heterogeneity between serious or persistent absentees in the risk factors they experience, but almost all do have a risk pattern in which a single risk factor interacts with other environments around the individual, thereby often increasing the risk for that young person. It therefore seems to be mainly the accumulation of and interplay between different risk factors at different levels that underlies serious or persistent absence from school. Van der Laan et al. (2009) already established this accumulation of different risk factors that many persistent absentees experience, but the case studies in this research provided more insight in the exact interplay between different risk factors. This interaction of risk factors might account for the variation between the different vulnerability/offending behaviour groups, but it does not in itself explain the differences between English and Dutch serious or persistent absentees.

### **8.3.2 Impact of variables at the macrolevel of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory**

The previous section indicates that within all microsystems and at the individual level there are differences in how prevalent certain risk factors are between serious or persistent absentees in England and the Netherlands. This suggests that variables at another level might impinge on which groups of people are more likely to be affected and therefore become serious or persistent absentees in each of the countries. It is, therefore, possible that macrolevel factors such as the nature of the education system, the type of welfare state and the level of inequality in both countries impact on which groups of young people become serious or persistent absent from school. In this respect, it is interesting that many Dutch absentees mention they are attending education at a too low or too high level, whilst English absentees only complain about having to attend a special school instead of a mainstream school. In addition, the Dutch tracked education system seems to create the problem that many of the serious or persistent absentees have to redo certain classes and thereby become much older than their classmates; this then leads to having no connection with classmates anymore and therefore not enjoying school. The English education system, on the other hand, seems to bring about a different presentation of the same kind of problems when young people are far behind their peers and then stop attending because they are ashamed of their academic abilities. The different level of inequality and the difference in the type of welfare state might partly explain why a higher proportion of English absentees are experiencing financial problems and house moves in their family.

Another influencing factor could be the ethnic differences between the serious or persistent absentees in Rotterdam and Portsmouth. The sample in Portsmouth consists primarily



of White British/European serious or persistent absentees, whilst in Rotterdam many of the absentees in the sample are from non-western ethnic minority groups (for example Antillean, Turkish and Moroccan absentees, See Chapter 5). Maynard et al. (2017) point out that whilst there are some similarities in truancy risk factors between ethnic groups, there is also variation in the prevalence of certain risk factors among different ethnic groups. These differences account for heterogeneity within the total group of serious or persistent absentees. It is, therefore, certainly possible that the different ethnic groups that are affected in the Netherlands compared to England contribute to the dissimilarity of the prevalence of certain risk factors. Whilst ethnicity in itself can be seen as a factor at the individual level, macrolevel factors (like culture and how society responds to ethnic differences) might impact on which ethnic groups are more likely to become serious or persistent absentees in each of the countries. This research project did not conduct research specifically into the influence of factors at the macrosystem level of Bronfenbrenner's theory, but the difference in the prevalence of certain risk factors does suggest that societal or cultural factors (so factors further away from the individual) do impact on which children and young people become serious or persistent absentees in England and the Netherlands. Whilst this paragraph explains the various way in which ethnicity can impact on the onset of serious or persistent absence from school, the same processes are likely at play for many other variables. The organisation of a society and how is responded to girls versus boys, children with special needs, children who come from families with a low socioeconomic status, and children who live in poverty is also likely to impact on which groups of children are more likely to become serious or persistent absentees. So, for some risk factors not only the factor in itself but also the interaction with society seems to influence on serious or persistent absence from school, which makes it even more complex to establish in which way these factors are connected to serious or persistent absence from school.

#### **8.4 How to respond to serious or persistent absence from school**

The research has characterised serious or persistent absence from school as a complex and wicked problem. Since it is very difficult to solve a problem as complex as serious or persistent absence from school completely, government policies in both countries should probably aim for a reduction of serious or persistent absence from school. Chapter 3 indicates that in both countries a variety of agencies respond to serious or persistent absentees and/or their parents. The focus of this research is on establishing the effects of responding to the parents and/or the young person, and to discover whether the emphasis in the response in both countries seems to be on welfare or punishment. Finally, the strategy behind the responses in practice will be considered.

#### **8.4.1 Responding to parents and/or the serious or persistent absentee**

The findings of this research indicate that the legal punishment of both the serious or persistent absentee (only in the Netherlands) and/or their parents does not seem to have a clear impact on the three short-term outcome variables: improving attendance, obtaining a qualification and having employment (See Chapter 5). With only one in five absentees improving their attendance after the response and even lower success rates for the other outcomes, it is fair to say that the current response in both countries does not seem to be very successful. Especially English professionals working in the field of persistent absence were also very sceptical about the possibility of finding an effective response to serious or persistent absence from school. This seems to be in line with research on complexity theory and wicked problems, which suggests that these problems are rarely solved (Daviter, 2017; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Although the results of this research project indicate that the low success rate of the response of the local authority might not only be due to the complexity of serious or persistent absence from school. Professionals in both countries, after all, do suggest that the response should be tailored more to the individual needs of the serious or persistent absentee, and policies should focus on prevention (starting at primary schools). The research evidence also supports the idea that responding to absence at an earlier stage could prevent the onset of serious or persistent absence from school (McConnell & Kubina, 2014).

In England, parents first receive a final warning before they are taken to court. Prosecuted parents often receive a financial punishment, sometimes in conjunction with some form of a conditional sentence. In the Netherlands, prosecuted parents mostly received a conditional fine. This indicates that in both countries, agencies mainly involve parents with the serious or persistent absence from school of the young person to try to improve attendance via the parents. Although there seems to be little effect on the short-term outcomes from involving the parents by warning or prosecuting them, the research evidence into effectiveness of interventions does suggest that involving parents at an early stage might create positive results (Cook et al., 2017; McCluskey et al., 2004). So, instead of warning and prosecuting parents once the absence is already serious or persistent, policies should focus more on improving communication between schools and parents (mesosystem). Schools, both in England and the Netherlands, are often trying to contact parents as soon as a child is not in school, but as some of the interviewed professionals indicated (See Chapter 7) many parents do not read text messages, listen to voice mails or open letters. Therefore, schools probably should focus on more meaningful communication that parents will take notice of. McConnell and Kubina (2014) even suggest that when parents are involved with the attendance of their child from a young age (in primary school), this will be beneficial for the attendance rate throughout the school career of that young person.

The case files in both countries indicate that schools take some measures, focusing on the young person, before the serious absence from school is reported to the local authority or the education welfare service. In Portsmouth, many of the serious or persistent absentees were placed on a reduced timetable. This often had to do with a combination of their absence from school and their behaviour whilst at school, but was not effective in relation to the three short-term outcome variables (improving attendance, obtaining a qualification and having employment) in any of the cases in this research. Most of the time, the young person failed to attend even the reduced hours. However, Reid (2012) argues that reduced timetables can be effective in tackling specific-day absence (for example if a student skips school on days that physical education is on the programme), but more research has to be conducted into the effectiveness of the use of reduced timetables to improve behaviour and general attendance. In the Netherlands, schools are frequently offering voluntary professional support, such as school societal work, to the young person. However, as many of the professionals pointed out in the interviews it is very hard to get the young person and/or their parents to engage with (voluntary) professional support. It is also for that reason, that most professionals in both countries believe it is good that there is the possibility of prosecuting parents when they refuse to cooperate with all the support that is offered. Most Dutch professionals also feel that the option of prosecuting the young person should exist for the very same reason. According to the professionals the possibility of prosecuting both the parents and (according to some professionals) the young person can work as a deterrent and opens up the opportunity to force parents and/or the young person to cooperate with support. This research project did not investigate this possible deterrent effect on other young people and/or their parents. However, the short-term outcomes for the serious or persistent absentees do indicate that prosecution (of both the young person and/or the parents) is not very successful in reducing absence, obtaining a qualification and finding employment. This means that it would be better to adopt other responses that could possibly have more effect, especially when the characteristics of the serious or persistent absentees (e.g. their level of vulnerability and offending behaviour) are taken into account. If that happens a more individualised response could be created, which will likely benefit more serious or persistent absentees.

#### **8.4.2 Welfare versus punishment**

Throughout this thesis all responses to serious or persistent absence from school, both the formal legal response and what seems to happen in practice, have been interpreted along the lines of a welfare versus punishment continuum. Haines and Case (2018) argue that a punitive youth justice system clearly does not work and that punishment can lead to higher rates of reoffending because of the labelling and stigmatization that takes place. The results of this research indicate that in both

countries the official legal response seems to be more on the punitive side of this continuum, whilst what happens in practice is more welfare orientated. This does not mean, however, that both parents and young people (keeping in mind the focus on the young person in the Netherlands) did not experience the response as punitive. But in both countries many conditional sentences are given, and the relatively low number of warnings and prosecutions of parents in both England and the Netherlands suggests that although there is the legal option of punishing parents, circumstances are taken into account and this option is not used automatically.

The debate between professionals on whether or not it should be possible to hold responsible and even prosecute the serious or persistent absentee, mainly focuses on the effect criminalisation might have on the young person. According to Jamieson (2012) the general tendency towards criminalising social and youth justice policy in England and Wales has led to the further exclusion and alienation of groups of young people. Professionals in favour of prosecution all argue that it should only be used as a last resort when nothing else seems to have created a positive effect. Moreover, the number of young people that are only sentenced to a conditional sentence in combination with youth probation in Rotterdam, indicates that the main aim of the judge does not seem to be to punish the child, but to get the right support into place to motivate the young person to attend school again. However, for a serious or persistent absentee having to be present in court and being sentenced by a judge in itself might already feel like a punishment. So, even though the given sentence might not be very serious, the young person may well feel criminalised. The same is true for prosecuted parents in Portsmouth. Because even though the option of imprisoning parents is rarely used by judges in practice, parents have to attend a court hearing and often have to pay a fine or costs.

#### **8.4.3 Coping, taming or solving strategies**

This research project has indicated that there are many organisations involved in responding to serious or persistent absence from school. Table 11 in Chapter 3 showed the options schools, local authorities and the courts have in responding to serious or persistent absentees and their parents. However, in practice there are even more organisations working with serious or persistent absentees, such as professional support organisations in the areas of mental health, aggression regulation and career guidance. Which organisations are involved often depends on the reason a young person first came to the attention of services; this could be due to social, behavioural or learning problems at school, offending behaviour, problems within the family, the serious or persistent absence from school or many other reasons. This confirms the complexity of serious or persistent absence from school, because it shows that it often is an interplay of many different factors that leads to serious or persistent absence from school. For this reason, governments should

give professionals time and space to focus on improving outcomes for the serious or persistent absentees in the long run, instead of setting easy to measure targets for the short term (Devaney & Spratt, 2009).

Because serious or persistent absentees often have to deal with many problems, a response to the serious or persistent absentee is not always (solely) aimed at reducing the serious or persistent absence from school. For example, a prolific offender, who is also a persistent absentee, will probably have to appear in court because of the committed offences. The focus of the sentence will then not necessarily be on solving the absence from school, because it is often the organisation to which the serious or persistent absentee first came to the attention that is providing the response. In this respect one could argue that a taming strategy is used in that some aspects of the overall problem may show some improvement but the problem is still there. This certainly is what happens when this organisation responds to the young person without involving other services and organisations. But in practice, a school might for example provide a first response, but can also refer the serious or persistent absentee to other support organisations or the local authority. When this happens, the strategy used looks more like a coping strategy, in which different organisations try to tackle the problem separately. Finally, government policies frequently try to establish cooperation between different services to provide a holistic response to the problem. Governments, therefore, seem to aim for the solving strategy. See for example the Government's Troubled Families Programme, in which one case worker is appointed to a family to coordinate support and tackle several problems within that family (of which serious or persistent absence from school can be one) simultaneously (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012). The solving strategy seems to be adopted by the Dutch youth probation service as well, because the youth probation officer sets up and coordinates the support for a young person in different areas. This shows that the strategy used to respond to each case of serious or persistent absence from school is different and often depends on how the young person's absence from school has come to the attention of different services. So, all three strategies distinguished by Daviter (2017) are used but for different cases of serious or persistent absence from school. For some cases there might even have been an overlap of the taming, coping and solving strategy, so which strategy was adopted in each of the countries is not clear-cut (Daviter, 2017). However, in both countries governments should consider to aim for a reduction in serious or persistent absence from school instead of solving it completely. This is possible for individual cases (i.e. improving their attendance, but not getting it to a hundred percent) or for groups of cases (i.e. focusing policies on those groups of absentees that are most likely to return to regular attendance, thereby acknowledging that other groups may stay serious or persistent absentees).

## 8.5 Implications for practice

Professionals working in the field of serious or persistent absence from school do indicate that it is often very difficult to get positive results once the absence from school has already progressed to become serious or persistent. It is, therefore, crucial to focus more on prevention. Since many serious or persistent absentees have experienced adversities from a very young age, which has often led to problems in other areas as well (See case studies in Chapter 6), more emphasis on signalling young people who are at risk already in primary schools could be beneficial. As Thornton et al. (2013, p.2) indicate: 'It is important to see absenteeism as a phenomenon that may start early and is likely to become a more serious issue as the child moves through the education system'. However, in order for prevention to be successful, primary schools should be equipped (both with knowledge and resources) to perform this task.

But prevention will never work for all individuals, which means that it is highly likely that there will always be serious or persistent absence from school that has to be responded to. If the focus on prevention could reduce the number of serious or persistent absentees, it is likely that only the most serious cases will still become absentees. And for these cases, it is probably necessary to change expectations and goals. Both the English and the Dutch government seem to expect that everyone should be able to obtain a qualification. However, many serious or persistent absentees suffer from learning problems and do not perform well at school. Some absentees even struggle to read and write. Increasing the compulsory education age, especially for these young people by adding a qualification requirement (which they are highly unlikely to pass), will make the situation only worse. In the Netherlands, the new government (installed in 2017) has plans to increase the qualification requirement until the age of 21 (VVD, CDA, D66, & Christenunie, 2017). However, since they are unable to get these young people to attend regularly whilst they are (under) 16, it seems unlikely that raising the compulsory education age will be the solution. Rather government and local policies should focus on offering these young people other options; for example there should be more emphasis on meaningful work-based learning and certification, that focuses on skills acquired and demonstrated.

The professional reports and ASSETS found in the case files of young people in both countries focused very much on everything that was going wrong (conceptualised as 'risks') in the life of the young person. There was little information available about protective factors, but these can actually be crucial for an effective response. An intervention could focus on trying to identifying strengths as well as trying to improve weak areas, thereby utilising strong points of the individual and/or the environment of the young person. So, whilst the focus on the bad things (or 'risks') is understandable, it could be worthwhile to also investigate strong points.

Both the RVDK in the Netherlands and the YOT in England use risk based assessments to estimate how best to respond to the young person. Once a young person is out of the system, however, there is no attention paid to the life trajectory of that individual. This suggests that the professionals performing the assessments in both countries, do not (generally) know whether or not their assessment of risk was correct or not. If these risk based assessments are trying to reduce risk and improve outcomes for the young person, organisations should follow up how the young people are doing with respect to crucial areas such as improving attendance, obtaining a qualification and finding employment.

## 8.6 Policy transfer

Assessing the possibility of policy transfer between England and Netherlands was part of the aims of this research project. Since the response in both countries was not very successful in creating positive outcomes (i.e. improving attendance, obtaining a qualification and having employment), it seems that focusing on the parents (England) or mainly on the young person (the Netherlands) when responding to serious or persistent absence from school does not make a big difference. Although the Dutch absentees in the sample were slightly more likely to improve their attendance and/or find employment than the English absentees. This suggests that using a conditional sentence with youth probation, which allowed for a very individualised response and the possibility to force young people to accept support seemed to be effective for some Dutch serious or persistent absentees. However, since the success rate in the Netherlands was still fairly low, it is not a response that should be transferred to England. The case studies in Chapter 6 also suggested that both countries struggle to effectively respond to *highly vulnerable* serious or persistent absentees. Furthermore, Chapter 5 indicated that whilst there are many similarities in the characteristics of serious or persistent absentees in both countries, there are also some differences. This means that a response that might be successful in one country is not necessarily successful in the other country.

The use of the term 'signal absence' is something that could be transferred to England. Many English professionals really liked this term, because it adequately describes how the absence of most serious or persistent absentees should be understood. The absence is very often indeed a signal that the young person is having troubles in one or more areas of their life. Using this term also clarifies the difference between unauthorised absences where the young person is going on a holiday during term time (which seems to dominate the public debate on absence from school in England), and the serious or persistent absence from school that was the focus of this research project. So, adopting the term 'signal absence' from the Netherlands could be beneficial for England.

## 8.7 Contributions to knowledge

The main strength of this research project is the comparative angle that was used to study the complex problem of serious or persistent absence from school. This project was the first to compare serious or persistent absence from school in England and the Netherlands and has brought to light some very interesting similarities and differences between the two countries. Serious or persistent absentees in both countries experienced an accumulation of risk factors at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3). Yet, English absentees experienced more problems in the family and were more likely to use drugs. Dutch absentees, on the other hand, displayed more sleep problems and were more often reporting to have no friends. In England, absentees also committed more and more severe offences than in the Netherlands. The difference in the amount and severity of offences seems to be reflected in the number of risk factors the *primarily offending* group in each country is experiencing. The Dutch absentees in the *primarily offending* group experience fewer risk factors compared to the other groups than the English absentees in the *primarily offending* group. The differences between serious or persistent absentees in England and the Netherlands suggest that government policies should also take into account factors that might impact on who become serious or persistent absentees.

The research that has thus far been conducted on serious or persistent absence from school has often taken an exclusively national or regional perspective. Kearny (2008a), who included research carried out in different countries in his review, concluded that there were mainly similarities in how serious or persistent absence from school manifests itself in different Western countries. This study therefore contributes to knowledge by confirming that there are indeed many similarities in the area of serious or persistent absence from school between England and the Netherlands (both Western countries), but more importantly the research provides evidence of some clear differences. The results of this research suggest that different groups are affected by serious or persistent absence from school in England and the Netherlands, which indicates that factors at the macrolevel impact on the onset and progression of serious or persistent absence from school. Because this is the case in England and the Netherlands, it is likely that macrolevel factors also influence how serious or persistent absence from school exhibits itself in other Western countries. This means that policies aimed to respond to serious or persistent absence from school could also focus on factors further away from the serious or persistent absentees; e.g. changing the education system or the way the care system is organised. Or at the very least the influence of these variables should be taken into account in the process of policy making.

Yet, this research project was not only unique because of the comparison of England and the Netherlands. The research also stood out in terms of its focus. Whereas most research that has



been conducted thus far has dealt with the effectiveness of a specific intervention programme aimed at reducing absence from school, this research project investigated the overall approach of local authorities in both England and the Netherlands in responding to serious or persistent absence from school. This research has shown that although the law in both countries sets out quite punitive responses to serious or persistent absentees and/or their parents, in practice professionals tend to search for more welfare-orientated solutions. Yet, the results also show that the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour are a better indicator for short-term outcomes than the response of the local authority. In both countries young people in the *high vulnerability/high offending behaviour* were even less likely to improve their attendance, obtain a qualification and/or find employment. This was also the case for the Dutch *primarily vulnerable* and the English *primarily offending* group. So, this research has shown that the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour have a clear impact on the likelihood of positive short-term outcomes for serious or persistent absentees in both countries.

Finally, viewing serious or persistent absence from school as a wicked problem is a contribution to knowledge from this research project. Pycroft and Bartollas (2014) indicate that complexity theory points towards the non-linearity of social problems. The case studies in Chapter 6 clearly demonstrate this non-linearity for serious or persistent absence from school. They reveal that there is a very complex interplay between risk factors within the same and at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1 Figure 3). The understanding that serious or persistent absence from school is a wicked problem has implications for both the conceptualisation of and the response to serious or persistent absence from school. It means that it is a problem which is hard to define and a multisystem model (like Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory) is therefore suitable to conceptualise it. It also suggests that responses maybe should not aim to solve serious or persistent absence from school, but could focus on coping or taming it instead (Daviter, 2017).

## **8.8 Recommendations**

This research project has studied serious or persistent absence from school as a wicked problem. The results of the study further corroborate the idea that the problem is very complex, since the case studies have shown how for each individual absentee risk factors at various levels interact with each other and influence on the absence from school. Viewing serious or persistent absence from school as a wicked problem has benefitted this research project, because it has informed the choice for a theoretical framework that would take into account variables at many different levels that impact on serious or persistent absence from school. Future research on serious or persistent

absence from school should, therefore, also acknowledge the complexity of serious or persistent absence from school and treat it as a wicked problem from the start.

The results of this research clearly indicate that macrolevel variables are influencing which groups of young people are more likely to become serious or persistent absentees. Because these factors at macrolevel are further away from the serious or persistent absentee and their influence is more indirect, it is hard to establish the exact effect each factor at macrolevel has. This means that more comparative research is needed to define the impact that different macrolevel variables have: e.g. a large scale comparative study in which the focus lies on the difference and similarities between countries with a tracked education system versus countries with a non-tracked education system on both the scope of absence from school and especially the characteristics of the serious or persistent absentees. The same could be done for the impact of the type of welfare states and the levels of inequality in a society.

Furthermore, this research project was unique in comparing the overall response to serious or persistent absence from school in two countries. Yet, the main focus of this research was on responses of agencies that became involved with the serious or persistent absentee after their absence had already progressed to a serious or persistent level. In the case files in both countries, however, it became clear that schools often had tried to take measures to reduce the absence from school as well, before reporting the absence to the authorities. This was confirmed by Finning et al. (2018), who indicated that English educational practitioners mentioned several ways in which they adapted the school context for students with school attendance problems, such as reduced timetables, virtual classrooms, reintegration packages, having a designated point of contact, home visits and alternative educational provisions. Most of these measures were, however, outside the scope of this research. Future research could focus on the effectiveness of these school-based measures in preventing the onset of serious or persistent absence from school. This could also shed fresh light on how effective schools are in preventing serious or persistent absence, and which factors (e.g. child characteristics or school characteristics) are decisive in whether or not these measures taken at (primary or secondary) school level are successful in preventing serious or persistent absence from school.

The results of this research suggest that the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour impact on both the characteristics of serious or persistent absentees and the likelihood of getting positive short-term outcomes. The results, however, also indicate that there is a difference between the Dutch and English *primarily offending* group both in the number of risk factors they experience and the short-term outcomes; Dutch absentees in the *primarily offending* group had fewer risk factors and were more likely to get positive outcomes. This means that further research

could investigate how the level of vulnerability and offending behaviour influence the outcomes for serious or persistent absentees.

## 8.9 Final conclusion

The main aim of the research was to investigate serious or persistent absence from school in England and the Netherlands and to establish whether (parts of) a response could be transferred to the other country. The majority of serious or persistent absentees in both countries experiences an accumulation of risk factors at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1, Figure 3). Unfortunately, the results indicate that the response used in both countries has not been very successful in creating positive outcomes for the young person, although some of the serious or persistent absentees in the Netherlands did indicate that they had really benefitted from the guidance of a youth probation officer, and some serious or persistent absentees in both countries managed to improve their attendance, obtain a qualification and/or find employment. However, the majority of serious or persistent absentees in both England and the Netherlands did not get a positive outcome after their serious or persistent absentee had come to the attention of the services. So, it is difficult on the basis of this research to pinpoint one response or one effective element of a response that works in all or most cases. The complexity of serious or persistent absence from school suggests that a very individualised approach is necessary.

Furthermore, not the type of response but the level of offending behaviour and vulnerability seems to best predict whether or not the serious or persistent absentee improves attendance, obtains a qualification and finds employment. In both countries, absentees in the group who experienced the least risk factors on average (in the Netherlands the *primarily offending* group and in England the *low vulnerability/low offending behaviour* group) outperform other young people on the short-term outcomes. This indicates that serious or persistent absentees who experience relatively few risk factors might benefit from a light touch response to the serious or persistent absence from school, whilst individuals who have many risk factors at different levels might need a very intensive multisystemic approach. A response aimed solely at punishing the young person or the parent, which does not target the root of the problem, will not be beneficial in most of these very serious cases. However, it might work for 'luxury absence' (See Chapter 1 Figure 1) cases and it could maybe have a deterrent effect on other young people who are on the verge of becoming a serious or persistent absentee.

This study has followed serious or persistent absentees until there was no information available anymore in the databases of the YOT and the RVDK. So, usually until young people were 18 or slightly older. A much longer longitudinal study could shed some light on the life trajectories of the serious or persistent absentees. A longitudinal study into serious or persistent absentees

could also further assess the impact of early vulnerability and offending behaviour on the life courses of these young people. Finally, a longitudinal study might be able to establish which factors (i.e. factors at the individual level, within a specific microsystem, at the exosystem or macrosystem level or a combination of factors at different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (See Chapter 1, Figure 3)) determine whether or not a specific response to the serious or persistent absentee and/or the parents will be successful.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Data collection instrument for the case files

#### Instrument for the analysis of case files of serious or persistent absentees

##### Part 1: General information/demographics

1. What is the case number?
2. Date of Birth
3. How old was the young person when the persistent absence started? (age, months)
4. What is the gender of the young person?
  1. Boy
  2. Girl
5. State the ethnic details of the young person (f.e. White British)
6. Date of last asset in the YOIS system? (dd/mm/yyyy)
7. In what family situation is the young person living?  
*(When the child is taken into care or custody, state the living situation prior to the placement in care or custody)*
  1. With both biological parents
  2. With both biological parents in a co-parenting arrangement
  3. With the biological father
  4. With the biological mother
  5. With the biological father and new partner (stepmother)
  6. With the biological mother and new partner (stepfather)
  7. With foster parents
  8. With adoptive parents
  9. With a family member (other than the parents)
  10. Other...
8. Is the young person currently living in a different situation than answered in question 7 (eg. In care)? If yes, where?  
.....
9. How many siblings does the young person have?  
.....siblings
10. a. Is there currently assistance aimed specifically at the young person?
  1. yes
  2. no
  3. Is not clearb. Is there currently assistance aimed at the family?  
(f.e. MST or FFT)
  1. yes
  2. no
  3. Is not clearc. Does one of the parents currently get assistance?  
(f.e. debt assistance or psychologist)
  1. yes

2. no
3. Is not clear

11. Did the young person or the family get assistance in the past?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Is not clear

## **Part 2: offending behaviour**

12. How many crimes did the young person commit/ how many charges have there been against the young person?

.....crimes (if the answer to this question is 0, skip the other questions in part 2)

13. How often did the young person commit the following types of crimes?

- a. .... property crimes (f.e. theft, burglary shoplifting)
- b. .... violent crimes (f.e. assault by beating/assault on a police officer)
- c. .... criminal damage
- d. .... Traffic offences
- e. .... Offences against the opium law
- f. .... Breach (of any of the sentences for earlier crimes)
- g. .... Other offences, namely.....

14. What was the age of the young person when committing the first crime?

..... (years, months)

15. What kind of sentences did the young person get for the crimes he/she committed?

- a. .... final warning
- b. .... Referral order
- c. .... Youth rehabilitation order
- d. .... Detention and training order
- e. .... Compensation order
- f. .... other, namely.....

## **Part 3: seriousness of the absence**

16. How long is the period in which the absence took place?

..... Days

17. What was the main type of absence?

1. Authorised absence
2. Unauthorised absence
3. An equal mix of both
4. Is not clear



18. Which of the following describes the type of absence of the young person?  
(more answers possible)
1. The young person misses specific lessons strategically (f.e. physical education or mathematics)
  2. The young person is often late and misses the first hours of school
  3. The young person occasionally misses some not-specific lessons
  4. The young person misses whole school days
  5. The young person misses whole school weeks
  6. The young person did not attend school anymore for a long time
  7. Fixed-term exclusion
  8. Permanent exclusion
  9. is not clear in the report
  10. other, namely.....
19. Did the parents know that their child was not attending school?
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Is not clear
20. Were there in primary school already attendance problems (*Spencer (2009) argues that early attendance problems are an important predictor for later persistent absence*)
1. Yes, the child was already persistent absent in primary school
  2. Yes, the child was above average not attending school without a valid reason
  3. Yes, the child was above average not at school due to illness
  4. No
  5. Is not clear in the report
21. Does the young person already show antisocial behaviour at a young age? *Moffit (1993) argues that this can indicate whether the young person is a life-long persistent or adolescent limited offender. (Antisocial behaviour is defined as not age adequate behaviour or more than average antisocial behavior, such as biting, kicking, hitting or stealing. Definition from Loeber and Farrington (2000): a repetitive pattern of negative, defiant, oppositional, disobedient and hostile behaviour towards an adult or a disturbance of the behaviour of a child with a duration of minimal 6 months)*
1. yes
  2. no
  3. Is not clear in the report

#### **Part 4: Reasons for absence**

*(Kearny (2008) argues that reasons for absence effect absence directly and therefore differ from risk- and protective factors)*

22. Wich/who causes the absence from the young person? (Dube and Orpinas, 2009)
1. The motivation to not attend school stems completely from the young person itself

2. The motivation to not attend school stems completely from external influences (f.e. parents that keep the child at home)
  3. The motivation to not attend school is a mix between 1 and 2
  4. Is not clear in the report
23. Which of the following reasons is applicable to the absence from school? (Kearny, 2008)

*(More answers are possible)*

1. Negative reinforcement – The young person does not attend school to avoid anxious situations at school (f.e. walking through the corridor, going to the toilet or being at the schoolyard during breaks)
2. Negative reinforcement – The young person does not attend school to avoid social and evaluative situations (the young person has difficulties with contact with peers, exams, and oral presentations)
3. Positive reinforcement – The young person does not attend school because of the attention at home from significant others (often parents)
4. Positive reinforcement – The young person does not attend school because there are specific other things to do that are more fun (f.e. playing computer and video games, watching television, parties and hanging out with friends)
5. Other, namely..... *(F.e. school factors or lack of motivation)*
6. Not clear

#### **Part 5: Response to persistent absence**

24. What has the response to the parents in relation to the persistent absence of the young person been?

*(more answers possible)*

1. Nothing
2. The parents were fined
3. The parents were prosecuted
4. The parents were imprisoned
5. Is not clear
6. Other, namely.....

25. What has the response to the young person been?

*(more answers possible)*

1. Has been given extra attention at school
2. Has been given assistance/care at home
3. Has switched school (to a normal other school)
4. Has switched school (to a school for children with special needs)
5. Has been given a reduced timetable
6. Is not clear
7. Other, namely.....

#### **Part 6: Background/characteristics of persistent absentees**

Indicate for each of the following propositions whether they are true for the young person

1: Yes 2: no 3: is not clear 4: not applicable (na)

**Parents/family** (Kearny, 2008; Van der Laan et al., 2009; Lauchlan, 2003; Lyon & Cotler, 2007; Pellegrini, 2007; Weerman & Van der Laan, 2006)

26. Parents are separated (divorced)
27. One or more of the biological parents or guardians suffers from physical complaints or did suffer from physical complaints in the past (The physical complaints should be prolonged and should impact on the relationship between the parent and the young person)
28. One or more of the biological parents/guardians has psychological problems (a psychological disorder (f.e. depression or anxiety disorder)) or has had psychological problems in the past
29.
  - a. One or more of the biological parents/guardians has or has a history of drugs and/or alcohol abuse
  - b. One or more of the biological parents/guardians has police contacts
  - c. One or more of the biological parents/guardians has been taken into custody/has spent or is spending time in prison
30. Parents expect the young person to take care for one or more brothers/sisters or the young person has to take care of him/herself
31. There are or have been many conflicts between the biological parents (currently when they are still together or after the divorce, or before they separated)
32. There are currently many conflicts in the family (between the educators, between young person and educators, between young person and brothers/sisters)
33. There is little or poor communication within the family (between educators and young person)
34. Parents maltreat or neglect the young person (or this has happened in the past, this includes witnessing domestic violence)
35. There is a disturbed parent-child relationship (with one of the parent(s) who raises the young person) (Parent does not have the parenting role anymore and child does not have the child role anymore)
36. The child has little/no contact with the biological parent with whom he/she is not living
37. The parents/educators have poor parenting skills/would like assistance with raising their children
38. The parental involvement with the school attendance is little. There is little supervision and attention for the young person (not much attention for coming on

time, no one at home when the child has to leave for school, little interest in the academic performance or even maintaining the absence by calling the child in sick and supporting the absence)

- 39. Parents do not value education as important
- 40. The family provides little structure and clarity for the young person
- 41. a. One of the parents is undesirably unemployed  
b. None of the parents/educators has a job, family lives of benefits
- 42. The family has a low income/lives in poverty/has debts/the young person is on free school meals
- 43. Parents experience much stress

**Brothers/sisters** (Van Burik et al., 2007; Van der Laan et al., 2009)

- 44. One or more brothers/sisters have left school without a degree
- 45. One or more brothers/sisters are also persistent absent from school/ have problems at school
- 46. One or more brothers/sisters have had police contacts because of committed crimes

**Young person** (Van Burik et al., 2007; Kearny, 2008; King & Bernstein, 2001; van der Laan et al., 2009; Pellegrini, 2007; Spencer, 2009).

- 47. The young person has physical complaints without a clear medical condition (f.e. headache, stomach ache and nausea) (somatic complaints)
- 48. The young person has clear health problems (chronic/handicap)
- 49. The young person goes to bed late and/or has trouble getting out of bed early
- 50. The young person has sleep problems (not being able to go to sleep or waking up very often)
- 51. The young person is anxious, mentions anxiety as a factor in not attending school (specific phobia, GAD, separation anxiety disorder)
- 52. The young person has performance anxiety
- 53. The young person has a depression/is often gloomy
- 54. The young person shows behaviour problems or has a behaviour disorder (ADHD, ODD, CD)
- 55. The young person has attention/concentration problems
- 56. The young person has learning difficulties (f.e. dyslexia)

- 57. The young person often plays computer games/spends a lot of time behind the computer
- 58. The young person watches television a lot
- 59. The young person does not participate in organised leisure activities (not a member of a sports club/not playing a musical instrument)
- 60. The young person drinks too much alcohol  
*(When the young person is younger than 16: alcohol during the week or more than 2 units in the weekend. Young person older than 16: more than 2 units a day during weekdays and more than ... units in the weekend)*
- 61. The young person uses soft drugs/or has used this regularly (more than once)
- 62. The young person uses hard drugs
- 63. The school performance of the young person is weak
- 64. The young person has a low self-esteem and/or a negative self-image
- 65. The young person is easily angered/is often aggressive
- 66. The young person is impulsive in his/her behaviour
- 67. The young person has experienced traumatic events in the past
- 68. The young person has other responsibilities *(f.e. the young person believes he/she has to stay home to take care for the parents/brother(s)/sister(s))*
- 69. The young person is a teenage parent/ or will become a teenage parent soon

**Friends** (Van der Laan et al., 2009; Lyon & Cotler, 2007)

- 70. The young person has little to no friends (less than 2)
- 71. The young person has friends who are little academically oriented (f.e. are unauthorised absent frequently, or do not attend school anymore)
- 72. The young person has friends who have police contacts
- 73. The young person spends a large amount of time with friends outside the house

**School** (Kearny, 2008; Lauchlan, 2003; Pellegrini, 2007; Zhang et al., 2007)

- 74. The young person does not enjoy school/would prefer to attend a different school
- 75. The young person finds it hard to connect with his/her peers at school
- 76. The young person gets physically bullied at school (f.e. gets beaten up)

- 77. The young person gets emotionally bullied at school
- 78. The young person bullies others
- 79. The young person feels unsafe at school
- 80. The relationship between the young person and the teacher(s) is bad
- 81. There is little contact/ or the contact between parents and school is not good (poor communication between school and parents)

**Neighbourhood/social environment** (Van Burik et al., 2007; Gavazzi et al., 2005; Van der Laan et al., 2009; Lyon & Cotler, 2007; Kearny, 2008; Pellegrini, 2007; Spencer, 2009; Weerman & Van der Laan, 2006)

- 82. The young person lacks a supportive social network
- 83. The young person moved recently/will move soon
- 84. The young person is homeless

#### **Part 7: protective factors**

**Parents/family** (Kearny, 2008; Van der Laan et al., 2009; Lauchlan, 2003; Lyon & Cotler, 2007; Pellegrini, 2007; Weerman & Van der Laan, 2006)

- 85. The biological parents are still together
- 86. The young person has a good connection with the stepparent (only applicable when parents are divorced and there is a new partner)
- 87. The young person has a good connection and regular contact with the biological parent, which whom he/she is not living (only applicable in the case of divorced parents)
- 88. There are little/no conflicts between the divorced/separated biological parents (only applicable when parents are divorced, otherwise this protective factor will be addressed in question 89)
- 89. There are little conflicts in the family (between educators and between the young person and educators and brothers/sisters)
- 90. The parental involvement with the school is strong (f.e. monitoring the homework, much attention to being on time)
- 91. The young person has a good connection with one or more parents

**Brothers/sisters** (Rodriquez & Conchas, 2009)

92. The young person has one or more brothers/sisters who show good school attendance and performance/who can function as a role model

**Young person** (Lauchlan, 2003; Rodriquez & Conchas, 2009)

93. The young person has an average or good cognitive intelligence
94. The young person has a clear goal for the future, for which education is necessary
95. The young person values the importance of education and obtaining qualifications

**Friends** (Van der Laan et al., 2009; Lyon & Cotler, 2007)

96. The young person has mainly friends that are academically orientated and attend school regularly
97. The young person does not have good friends with police contacts

**School**(Kearny, 2008; Lauchlan, 2003; Pellegrini, 2007; Zhang et al., 2007)

98. The young person has a good relationship with the teacher(s)
99. The young person has an adult at school who guides him/her individually (mentor)  
*(It has to be someone who really invests time in the young person and who has a good relationship with the young person and someone who the young person trust)*
100. The young person connects well with his/her peers at school
101. The young person indicates that this is the school he/she wants to attend
102. The young person has no problem with the level of the school work (performs well at school)

**Neighbourhood/social environment** (Van Burik et al., 2007; Lyon & Cotler, 2007)

103. The young person receives a large amount of social support (f.e. in the neighbourhood, from the larger family)

**Part 8: Trajectories/follow-up**

104. Did the school attendance of the young person improve after the response?
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Not clear
105. Did the young person leave school with a degree/did the young person obtain any qualifications?
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Not clear
  4. Not applicable (the young person is still in school)

106. Has the young person been taken into care after the response to the persistent absence?
1. Yes, state where and for how long
  2. No
  3. Was already in care
  4. Not clear
107. Has the young person been taken into custody after the response to the persistent absence?
1. Yes, state for how long and because of what offence
  2. No
  3. Not clear
108. Did the young person have new police contacts after the response to the persistent or serious absence?
1. Yes
  2. No
  3. Not clear
109. Is the young person unemployed?
1. Yes
  2. No (working)
  3. Not clear
  4. Not applicable (not looking for a job)



## **Appendix B: Interview Schedule for interviewing professionals**

### **Semi-structured interview schedule for the interviews with professionals**

#### **Function within the organisation/role of the organisation in dealing with serious absence**

- **What is your role/function?**
  - Relation to persistent absence/persistent absentees
  - Possible to compare the persistent absentees to other groups of young people you are working with
  - What are the links between you/your organisation and other organisation/professionals involved in dealing with persistent absence
- **How long are you working in this function?**
  - What has changed in the response to persistent absence over time?
  - Do you feel this is an improvement?
  - What was your function before you started in this function

#### **Characteristics and causes of persistent absence/persistent absentees**

- **What do you believe to be the causes for persistent absence from school?**
  - Would you describe persistent absentees as vulnerable
  - Strong protective factors?
  - Role of family
  - Role of school
  - Role of state
  - Role of the individual
  - Role of peer group
  - Relation with offending behaviour
    - cause or consequence?
- **Is there a typical persistent absentee?**
  - If yes, can you describe him/her?
    - Different when care is involved?
    - different when young person is serious offender?
  - If no, are there common characteristics of absentees?
- **Can you describe the last case in which you thought that the young person benefitted from the response (to the parent), and where you believe attendance will improve in the long run?**
  - Why do you think the response will have a positive effect in this case?
  - Have you heard how this young person is doing at the moment?

- **Can you describe the last case in which you thought this response will not be working in the long run and will not have many positive effects on the young person?**
  - What characteristics/circumstances were different in this case compared to the previous one?
  - What do you think would be effective in this case?
- **What do you think (if you do not have to take into account rules - the law, or costs) will be the most effective response to serious or persistent absence from school?**
  - Why
  - Do you see this happen any time soon?

### **Responding to persistent absence (the parents/carers and or young person)**

- **Do you believe parents should be punished for the persistent absence of their child?**
  - If yes, does the age of the child make a difference (primary school vs. secondary school)?
  - If yes, how?
  - If no, why not?
- **Do you believe the persistent absentee should be punished for the persistent absence?**
  - If yes, how?
  - If yes, does age make a difference?
  - If no, why not?
- **Do you believe interventions aimed at serious absence from school should address the young person?**
  - If yes, what kind of interventions?
  - If no, why not?
- **Do you believe interventions aimed at serious absence from school should address the parents/the family?**
  - If yes, why and how?
  - If no, why not?

### **End of the interview**

- **Thank you for participating in this interview**
  - is there anything you would like to add?

## Appendix C: Example of coding strategy of interviews with professionals

The researcher first identified some big themes that were emerging from the interviews. Examples of some of the big themes are:

- Causes
- Responsibility
- Response

These bigger themes were divided into smaller subthemes. Within the causes theme, for example, causes within the individual, family, school, neighbourhood, peers and causes at other levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory were distinguished. For each of these subthemes, a table was created in which all text phrases of each of the 12 interviewees related to that subtheme were placed. The table below is an example of such a table for the causes professionals mentioned that related to the family environment of the serious or persistent absentee (interviews 1 to 6 were in Dutch and 7 to 12 in English). Colour coding was then used to identify smaller subcategories (and links between them) within this subtheme. For the table below, the following subcategories were distinguished:

- Overburdened parents
- Parents not supportive/difficulties getting children to school/lack of structure
- Parents not valuing education/ no aspirations
- Child has caring responsibility (towards siblings or parents)
- Financial problems
- Inadequate housing
- Changes in the family structure/single-parent families
- Abuse
- Addiction of parents

	<b>family</b>
1	<p>Maar ook kinderen die eigenlijk gewoon in een omgeving zitten waarin het gewoon niet lekker loopt he, dat ze zelf ouders hebben die enorm overbelast zijn uh weinig toezicht kunnen bieden, gewoon emotioneel weinig beschikbaar kunnen zijn uhm dat zie ik als oorzaak. Ik zie soms ook financiële problematiek, dat er gewoon geen geld is om richting een school te gaan, en uhm dat is altijd een beetje zoeken van is het dan ook een excuus van het kind om niet te gaan of of ja zijn de middelen er niet. Uhm maar ik vind eigenlijk een heel groot deel wel vaak in dat ouders het gewoon ja thuis niet kunnen bolwerken, zelf overbelast zijn en der ook eigenlijk gewoon geen zicht is op het kind, maar ook dus niet de stimulans van joh ga nou naar school want het is zo goed voor je.</p> <p>Ja absoluut en zeker ook dat de vader inzicht is gaan tonen, want daar lag een heel grote zorg ook. Kinderen kunnen het niet alleen.</p>
2	<p>Dat zijn bijv. situaties waarin een kind heel verantwoordelijk wordt gehouden in de thuissituatie, bijv. met zorgen mbt andere broertjes en zusjes.</p>
3	<p>Wat ik ook wel regelmatig heb ingezet is gezinsondersteuning, omdat er toch ook wel in de aansturing van de ouders richting het kind miszit.</p> <p>. Een mogelijke oorzaak is de aansturing ouders dus, die daar onvoldoende in hebben gedaan of kinderen zelfs daarin bijna ondersteunen. Moeders die als een kind zegt ik ben ziek heel makkelijk daarin meegaan. Dus weinig daadkrachtige ouders die hun kind niet, ja die niet daadkrachtig optreden en die niet zeggen van je moet het gewoon gaan doen. Waar geen consequenties volgen, waarom zou je het dan als kind zijn doen.</p> <p>In de allochtone gezinnen kan het toch ook wel voorkomen dat kinderen, dat er een beroep op kinderen wordt gedaan, om mee te gaan naar een ziekenhuis met ouders. Vaak zie je toch ook dat ouders, dat de gezondheid wat zwakkker is. Daar kan ik geen verklaringen voor geven, maar ik had een Pakistaans meisje en die moeder heeft suikerziekte en die vader hartklachten en die spreken heel slecht Nederlands. Als die ouders ergens heen moeten, moet er toch iemand begeleiden en daar worden vaak de oudste met name dochters voor gebruikt om mee te gaan. Ja, en dan kan je natuurlijk niet naar school.</p> <p>Nou valt mee. Meestal is het toch wel redelijk aan te reizen. Wel dat ze bijv. een dag verzuimen omdat er een reisje naar Walibi gepland staat, waar je een eigen bijdrage hebt van 40 euro, dat ouders denken nou dat kan ik niet betalen. Maar echt het echte schoolverzuim, ik heb maar incidenteel gehoord dat het komt van ja ik kan de trein niet betalen of de metro.</p> <p><b>Ok, maar speelt er in die gezinnen wel vaak financiële problemen?</b></p> <p>Ja, dat wel. Ja. Ja zeker.</p> <p>. Maar het zijn wel allemaal gezinnen bijna die van bijstandsuitkeringen of net een baan net boven bijstandsniveau een baan en dat er veel schulden spelen. Maar om nou te zeggen, ik heb er een paar in mijn hoofd waar inderdaad de moeder heel hard werkte om het hoofd boven water te houden, zijn heel veel schulden, doordat ze werkt kan zij hem inderdaad om 7 uur zijn bed niet uittrappen om naar school te gaan, maar het is niet zo doordat ze geen geld hebben dat hij niet naar die school kan gaan. Omdat heel veel natuurlijk ook vergoed wordt in Nederland.</p> <p>. En ik denk dat het wel, als de ouders al een PV hebben gekregen hoor ik meestal dat ze een voorwaardelijke straf krijgen en dat lijkt me ook wel terecht, want dan komen we al weer terug op waar we het net over hadden, want het zijn toch vaak de gezinnen met weinig draagkracht. Als je daadwerkelijk een boete van 250 euro aan je broek hebt die niet betaald kan worden, wordt ook niemand gelukkiger van. Maar ik</p>

	<p>denk dat je daar wel een beetje de druk misschien kan opvoeren, want er zijn toch ook wel ouders die het toch misschien allemaal maar een beetje laten.</p> <p>Ik denk dat het heel belangrijk is dat je als ouders uitdraagt dat school belangrijk is, dat het belangrijk is je aan je afspraken te houden. En dat je als kinderen zich niet aan dat soort afspraken houden dat je in je opvoeding daar consequenties aan verbindt.</p>
4	<p>Problemen in de thuissituatie, dus kinderen die eigenlijk een volwassen rol toebedeelt krijgen, onder anderen hoor, dat is één van de oorzaken.</p> <p><b>En dat lag voornamelijk aan haar houding tov naar school gaan?</b>  Houding vanuit haarzelf, maar ook hoe ouders er tegenover staan. Het zijn mensen die afkomstig zijn van een woonwagenkamp en houden er sterke principes op na over de scheiding tussen de man en de vrouw. Meisjes en vrouwen worden toch voornamelijk gezien voor thuis, voor niet zozeer te leren, want die krijgen een man. (komt uit voorbeeld casus)</p>
5	<p>Maar ook met name thuissituatie. Wij werken op Zuid, je ziet toch veel problematiek daarzo. Of het nou huisvesting is, of grote gezinnen dat de oudere kinderen voor de kleinere moeten zorgen, ja er speelt veel meer dan alleen maar spijbelen.</p> <p>. Ja, weet je en rol van je familie vroeg je net, ja ik denk heel belangrijk tot hoe ver hebben kinderen de mogelijkheid dat de familie ze dusdanig stimuleert.</p>
6	Ik vind kijk met ouders is het vaak net zoals met de jeugdigen in schoolverzuim, die mensen verzuipen in hun eigen problemen
7	Reasons why family find this difficult: dealing with young persons behaviour (SEN) (wisselwerking individu – gezin), family changes, parents who haven't had access to educational support service
8	<p>Families have the biggest influence both positive and negative, families where generations didn't attend school, no aspirations.</p> <p>I think drugs and alcohol, levels of abuse, neglect all of those thing. I am talking about various degree, perhaps not even a degree that social care would be involved, you know, that is quite a cline from one to the other, so but levels of those things could certainly have an influence. Poverty, you know deprivation factors all of that sort of things.</p>
9	<p>Yeah sort of pro-social behaviour at home and relationships within the home. , they are in deprived areas of Portsmouth, you know the pockets that are really deprived, or they are surviving on benefits or one parent you know if there are two parents it is a one-parent income and benefits topping up the rest, yeah.</p> <p><i>No big gender difference:</i> But no I would say if you have got those characteristics of risk-taking, and vulnerability and lack of pro-social boundaries then examples I would say can be pretty similar for boys or girls.</p>
10	
11	Relationships breaking down, single mothers deciding to have children not having partners, and of course it is those ones that struggle when it comes to enforcing boundaries, because there is only one person enforcing rather than two, so you never get a good cop bad cop relationship.

	<p>, it is very difficult for one-parent families, especially if there is more than one child. I think it is very difficult, is it a life-style choice? I don't know. But the stability, from my point of view when I was younger, the stability of having two parents and having to answer to one of them if I didn't do something, sort of, not filled me with threat, but I knew there was gonna be a consequence. And I think also one-parent families try to not only be their parents, but also be their children's friend. And I think that is a fundamental flaw in trying to be your child's friend, because you are the parent and it is for you to decide ultimately when they are younger how you shape their life and being a friend, I don't think you can shape people's life so well.</p> <p>think one of the biggest issues that we have in the country, I think that people have, it is the value of what education can do to them and to their children and giving them greater life opportunities. If you don't believe the education system actually gives you something in life, then your value and its worth is useless to you.</p> <p><i>Family:</i> I think the fundamental issue that we have is that fragmented families tend to have very complicated, very chaotic lives, and in that circumstance I don't think in there that education is really important. I always link it to, with a lot of the families we deal with, if you came to a crossroad and it said easy route or hard route, they would choose the hard route. Because their logic doesn't seem to compute that there is an easy way. Their lives are very chaotic and education is very well down their ladder of things that need to be dealt with.</p> <p>Chaotic may be the fact that they are not very good parents, they allow their children to stay up late at night, they go to bed late themselves, they tend to have multiple partners come and go in and out the house, they allow children's friends going in and out of the house, go when they want, sleep when they want, don't get up in the mornings, have no financial worth, normally on benefits, struggling for money, normally got some sort of addiction, whether it would be alcohol, gambling, smoking, shopping, whatever, not what a reasonable person would do. In other words, they lack structure in their life. And everything seems to be made up on an ad-hoc day. So rather than tell a child, they would stand and argue with a child about something. It is not reinforcing the fact that I am the parent, what I say goes, if you don't like it, tough. So it is just general chaos, no organizational skills, no structure, no boundaries, uhm yes, chaos.</p>
12	<p>think sometimes families, it could be, maybe parents had difficult or bad experiences at school, that they don't value education as much as we would like them to. Sometimes it is practical, so it might be just that the family can't get up on time, or there is no structure to the mornings routine and that sort of thing</p>

## Appendix D: Letter of Ethics Committee confirming favourable opinion



Myrte Van Veldhuizen  
PhD Student  
ICJS  
University of Portsmouth

**REC reference number: 12/13:30**  
**Please quote this number on all correspondence.**

14<sup>th</sup> July 2014

Dear Myrte,

**Full Title of Study:** Persistent or serious absence from school, vulnerability and offending behaviour: A comparative study of England and Netherlands

**Documents reviewed:**  
Consent Form  
Interview Plan/Schedule  
Invitation Letter

Further to our recent correspondence, this revised proposal was reviewed by The Research Ethics Committee of The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.  
I am pleased to tell you that the proposal was awarded a favourable ethical opinion by the committee.

Kind regards,

FHSS FREC Chair  
**Jane Winstone**

Members participating in the review:

- David Carpenter
- Margaret Clarke
- Richard Hitchcock
- Patricia Shamai
- Jane Winstone

## Appendix E: UPR 16 Research Ethics Review Checklist

### FORM UPR16

#### Research Ethics Review Checklist

Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Research Degrees Operational Handbook for more information)



<b>Postgraduate Research Student (PGRS) Information</b>		<b>Student ID:</b>	UP669415
<b>PGRS Name:</b>	Myrte van Veldhuizen		
<b>Department:</b>	ICJS	<b>First Supervisor:</b>	Professor Francis Pakes
<b>Start Date:</b> (or progression date for Prof Doc students)	1 October 2012		
<b>Study Mode and Route:</b>	Part-time <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Full-time <input type="checkbox"/>	MPhil <input type="checkbox"/> PhD <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	MD <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Doctorate <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Title of Thesis:</b>	Serious or Persistent Absence From School, Vulnerability and Offending Behaviour: A Comparative Study Between England and the Netherlands		
<b>Thesis Word Count:</b> (excluding ancillary data)	85,889		
<p>If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative on your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University's Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study</p> <p>Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).</p>			
<b>UKRIO Finished Research Checklist:</b>			
(If you would like to know more about the checklist, please see your Faculty or Departmental Ethics Committee rep or see the online version of the full checklist at: <a href="http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/">http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/</a> )			
a) Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>		
b) Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>		
c) Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>		
d) Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>		
e) Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>		
<b>Candidate Statement:</b>			
I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s)			
<b>Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC):</b>	12/13.30		
If you have <i>not</i> submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered 'No' to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:			
<div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 20px; width: 100%;"></div>			
<b>Signed (PGRS):</b>			<b>Date:</b> 25-08-2018